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GRAINGER'S THORN.

VOL. III.



GRAINGER'S THORN.

A Novel.

BY

THOMAS WRIGHT

(THE 'JOURNEYMAN ENGINEER'),

AUTHOR OF

'SOME HABITS AND CUSTOMS OF THE WORKING CLASSES,'

'JOHNNY ROBINSON,' 'THE BANE OF A LIFE,' ETC.



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GRAINGER'S THORN.

BOOK III.—CHAPTER IV.

BURN-MY-HEART-OUT'S TURN.

TO dress like a betting-man, be horsey in conversation, and have the reputation of being a knowing card in horse-racing matters, was, in the opinion of the majority of the Black Country operatives, to be a notable and enviable personage. Such a man was Mr. Frederick Reeves, news-agent, stationer, and postmaster of Oringford, the market-town to the cluster of villages, of which Hopewell was one. He took no active interest in local affairs,

as did most of the other tradesmen ; he had by no means the best business in the town, and some of the more steady-going of his fellow-tradesmen were inclined to fight shy of associating with him. Yet he might be fairly said to be the leading man in the town, since, by reason of the characteristics spoken of, he was the best known, and most popular among the workmen of the district, who, as a body, were of decidedly sporting proclivities. A dash of mystery as to his antecedents rather added to, than detracted from, his popularity. It was rumoured that before he had come into that neighbourhood, he had been 'on the turf,' and had come to grief, as many more even of the knowing ones had done. If he had fallen from such high estate, he was still as a triton among the sporting minnows of the Black Country. He 'made a book' on the principal races, and thus afforded the workmen a means of promptly

and conveniently backing their fancy, or the 'tip' of their favourite prophet. He was the Sir Oracle of the smoke-room of the Dog and Partridge, wherein were wont to congregate the choicer spirits among the sporting miners and forgemen; and where he would occasionally show letters that he had received directly from racing quarters, and others that had accompanied remittances of sums varying from twenty to a hundred pounds, that he had, in his own phrase, 'picked up' over some race. And while horse-racing was his strong point, he was also considered to have taste in other matters. He was the possessor of a terrier, that, though defeated, had not been disgraced in a contest for the rat-killing championship of the neighbourhood; and it was he who had first discovered the talent in, and found the money to bring out, and back 'The Slashing Puddler,' a native of the district, who was

held to have covered it as well as himself with glory, by proving the victor in sundry prize-ring encounters.

In the matter of dress, Mr. Reeves was, for his position, extravagant as to expenditure, and loud as to taste; and this was especially the case with regard to jewellery, of which he generally 'sporting' a noticeably large quantity. To judge by his appearance, he was somewhere about forty years of age. He was of middle height, thick-set, and powerfully built, with dark complexion, and regular features. When dressed and be-jewelled, he looked a handsome, showy man; but there was a shifty, luring look in his eyes, and a vicious, animal expression about his mouth and the lower part of the face generally, that, to a close observer, would have argued his being of anything but an amiable disposition. He was unmarried, his household being managed by an old dame who, among her confidants,

spoke evilly of his temper, saying that bad was the best of it, and that when he was put out, he had the very devil in him.

On the night upon which the progress of our story makes it necessary that he should be introduced into its pages, Mr. Reeves had sent his housekeeper to bed, and was seated by himself at a table, on which there were a box of cigars, a bottle of brandy, and a couple of glasses. It was near midnight, and he was evidently fuming at the non-arrival of some one he had been expecting. There was a partially filled glass at his elbow, and, emptying it as he spoke, he muttered, 'D—n him, I wish he'd turn up ; I shall be sip—sipping here, till I get muddled, and make some blunder. Ah, there he is at last !'

This exclamation was evoked by a light tap at the side door which formed the private entrance, and opened directly into the room in which he sat. He rose and opened

the door just wide enough to admit a man, who, without a word of parley, stepped inside, and throwing open a great-coat in which he was enveloped, disclosed the face and form of Jim Harrison. He looked gaunt and haggard, and was coarsely and poorly clad. On rising from the sick bed upon which the circumstances connected with the death of his wife had prostrated him, he had, in the language of his friends, 'gone to the bad again.' He had taken to drink, and to associate with the loose and desperate characters of the neighbourhood; and though he could have obtained regular employment, he would only work by fits and starts. The burden of his song—and especially when in his cups—was ever, vengeance upon Grainger, and he openly repeated threats to 'do for him yet.' That he had been able to frustrate him in his plot against Harding we have seen. Barber's guess that it was information given

him by Florence Wilkinson that had put him in a position to do so, was a clever enough one as a mere guess, but it was altogether wide of the mark. It was Reeves who had enabled him to communicate with Harding in the manner he had done; how he had been able, and why he had been willing to do it, we shall presently see.

‘I hope you took care that no one saw you come in,’ he said, as the other flung himself into a seat, and filled a glass for himself.

‘Oh, yes! you needn’t alarm yourself,’ answered Harrison, with a touch of contempt in his tone.

‘Ah, well; the dare-devil style is all very well, Jim, but it is not all that is wanted at this stage of the thing I have in view. We can’t be too cautious. If he was only to hear that you had been coming here on the quiet, he would tumble to the

letter business in an instant, and that would mean the hulks for me.'

'I don't see that; he is as deep in the mud as you over that job.'

Reeves paced the apartment for a few seconds, and then tossing off a glass of brandy, he seated himself opposite his visitor, and speaking in a slow, emphatic tone, said,—

'Yes, Jim, he was the greater rogue of the two over that business; and I think he is pretty well as big a rogue as me in a general way; but he is not a known rogue, and I am, and he is aware of it, and could prove it. His bare word would outweigh all the oaths I could swear—he is the great Mr. Grainger; I am a ticket-of-leave man.'

While he had been speaking he had planted his elbow upon the table, and, with his chin resting on his hands, kept

his eyes unflinchingly fixed upon the other's face, the surprised expression of which he seemed rather to enjoy.

'Oh, has it been so bad as that with you, then?' said Harrison, who was as much puzzled as to how he might be expected to take this confession, as he was astonished at its being made.

'Yes; and what's more, it wasn't a case of injured innocence either. You know when people admit having been convicts, they have generally — on their own showing, that is — been victims of mistaken identity, or circumstantial evidence; but I'm not going to ask you to believe any rot of that kind about me.'

'Well, as you are speaking so plainly about yourself, I may as well tell you that it would be all the same if you did,' said Harrison with a grim smile; 'you're not at all the sort of chap to be taken for an injured innocent. But why do you tell

me such a thing at all? Of course you have a reason; it's not conscience that is making you speak, I'll be bound.'

'No; if I have a conscience it is not of the tender order. I'm not going to make open confession for the good of my soul; but because I've made up my mind that to tell you the little story of my life will be the best way of leading up to, and giving you confidence concerning the business I'm going to propose.'

'You said it was to cross Grainger; that's near enough for me,' Harrison broke in.

'It is to cross him, and serve ourselves in doing it; but you had better let me come up to the details of it in my own fashion. When I put you up to communicating with that Harding, I *did* let it be enough for you to know that if you acted as I told you to do, you would cross Grainger; but now I want you to know

exactly how accounts stand between us, and that I hate him.'

'My life with you on that, mate,' burst in Harrison, gripping the other's hand with an energy that sent the blood flushing to his face; 'though you can't hate him as I do, d—n him! But go on with what you have to say. I dare say it is partly the brandy that is speaking, but you needn't look so scared and doubtful. I'll be cool and close enough, if I must, to gain our end.'

'Well, cutting very minute details, it is just this way, Harrison: I belong to a respectable family, and I was given a fair start in life, and might have done well, but that one rather common weakness, and one rather *uncommon* gift, combined to ruin me. The weakness was gambling; the gift was the one of imitating any handwriting at sight. The one brought me to beggary by betting, the other to the

hulks, by enabling me to forge signatures. Some of my relations thought enough of me to feel disgraced by my hanging about among them when I came out on a ticket-of-leave; and, by way of getting rid of me, they bought the goodwill of the business here, and put me into it, thinking that in such an obscure hole I would be unknown, and out of the reach of temptation. But, with commission agents all over the country, it is a case of betting-made-easy in any corner that letters and newspapers reach. I gave way to my weakness again, with the same results as formerly.'

'But I always understood you made money by your betting.'

'Ay, that was because it was part of my policy to give people hereabout that impression; I took good care to let it be known when I won, but I kept the knowledge of my losses to myself; however, that

is neither here nor there now. When I had lost all that I could come by honestly, I made use of my gift again. I opened a letter of Grainger's, forged his name to a cheque that was in it, and got the money. I managed it cleverly enough; the letter showed no sign of having been opened; the clerks of the firm sending the cheque were suspected of having intercepted it, and Grainger employed a detective to look *them* up. As my ill-luck would have it, however, the fellow came down here in connexion with the job, and happened to see me. Of course he asked what I was doing in these parts, and on being told, at once saw the possibility of my having had a hand in the robbery. He let Grainger know what I had been, and they got on my track, and run me down, without my having the slightest notion that they were at work. The first I heard of it was when Grainger walked into this very room, and blanked it

on me. He showed me that he could have proved the robbery. "You see," he said, speaking as coolly as if it had been some ordinary business transaction he was discussing, "I could send you back to the hulks, but whether I do so or not lies with yourself. Transporting you would be no good to me, but keeping you in hand *might* be. A postmaster, clever at opening letters and imitating handwriting, and unscrupulous enough to do it, might be serviceable in many ways to a pushing business-man, not over-particular as to how he is served—do you understand?" "Yes," I said, with a bit of a grin, and then—and that is why I hate him—he turned upon me as if I had been some wretched cur. "No, you don't," he said, "at least not fully; your idea is that you should serve me as an accomplice; what I'm thinking of is a tool. A fellow that must do whatever I order him, without asking why or wherefore, and that I

can crush if he dares to show a sign of disobeying or blabbing. It is *that*, or penal servitude, you must choose between ; and if I should use you, don't think that you'll get any pull over me. I would deny anything you said, and show you up as an ungrateful scoundrel, plotting against the man who had forgiven you for robbing him, and as I could prove you to be a thief, forger, and convict, you can guess how much chance your word would have against mine." "

'And to cut it short,' said Harrison, 'he had you in a corner, and you knocked under, and he made you forge that letter in Miss Vernon's name, and stop the others.'

'Yes, and he has made me meddle with others, too. I have had to open the letters of other ironmasters hereabouts, whenever the envelopes have shown them to be tenders for contracts; that is how he has been able to get hold of a good deal of his work.

In it all he treated me like a dog, and so I behaved to him like a dog ; I took care to read letters before handing them to him, and that was how I was able to tell you what I did. What is more, though I didn't care about venturing to lay hands on any of his money again, I still took the liberty of opening his letters occasionally, on the speck of getting hold of some useful information, and that brings me to the matter I want to broach to you to-night.'

'I'm glad of that,' sneered the other.

'Well, well ; to be brief,' Reeves resumed, 'I know that Grainger, who is in London, will return by the mail-train to-morrow night, will drive himself from the station in his pony gig, and will have over five thousand in notes with him. I propose that we waylay him, and ease him of the money, what do you say?'

Harrison regarded him for a moment with a fiercely contemptuous expression ;

and then, in a low growling tone, exclaimed,—‘What do you mean? why don’t you speak out like a man? you needn’t mince with me!’

‘I mean what I say,’ answered Reeves, looking up in surprise; ‘I mean, that I’m game to join you in stopping and robbing him. I’ll do my fair share in the job, and not want more than my fair share of the spoil.’

‘Is that *all* you mean?’

‘Yes,’ said Reeves, still with a look of surprise on his face; ‘don’t you think it is enough?’

‘No!’ thundered Harrison, striking his hand fiercely upon the table; ‘I don’t think it is enough; you must have been a fool to imagine that I would,—to propose such a thing to me at all, if you meant no more! That is not my idea of revenge. I don’t want his money; it’s his life I want, and I’ll have it! Do you think

I'm all talk, or that I have forgotten that he as good as murdered the wife I loved so, as she was more than all the world to me ?

At the mention of his wife his voice softened and trembled, and he came to a momentary pause, as if the conflict of feeling was too much for him. But presently he sprang from his seat, and, beginning to pace the room in a manner that showed he was lashing himself into a passion, went on :—

‘I’ve not forgotten it ! I told him to his face,—Strike me dead I’d have his life for hers, and I will. I was only waiting for a chance, and I tell you plainly I won’t let this one slip.’

‘Why, you wouldn’t really murder him ?’ said Reeves, looking perplexed and nervous.

‘Wouldn’t ! D—n it, don’t I tell you *I will* ? I thought you said you hated him.’

‘So I do, and as far as that goes it

wouldn't trouble me to hear of his being put out of the way, or dying any dog's death. It's my own neck I'm thinking of; I don't care about risking that.'

Harrison, who appeared to have fallen into some engrossing train of thought, made no answer; and after waiting for a few minutes in silence, Reeves observed,—

'I must tell you, Jim, I think you are turning round on me very unfairly. I want money thundering bad, and built on getting this haul out of him.'

'Look here,' said Harrison, seating himself again, and speaking in a slow, determined tone. 'You say it is only risking your neck that you are afraid of. Now I would venture mine rather than be balked, but I don't want to do so unnecessarily; it would be a poor revenge, after all, if I came to the rope for it.'

'It would, and that is why——'

'I was going to say,' went on Harrison,

putting down the other's interruption, 'that I think I know a way in which the thing could be done, with very little risk to anybody's neck.'

'I don't know, Jim,' said the other dissuasively; 'there's a terrible deal of truth in the saying, that murder will out; you had better leave well alone.'

'I tell you my mind is made up,' said Harrison, doggedly; 'but, mark me, as you won't go with me, *you* must leave well alone altogether.'

'Oh, I see your drift; you want to grab all the money for yourself.'

'I don't want to grab any of it; I wouldn't touch a coin or note of his if I was dying of hunger.'

'Do you mean——'

'I mean, as I told you before, that it's revenge; his life, not money, I want.'

'You wouldn't take a share, then, under any circumstances?'

'I wouldn't. No particular offence to you, but I am neither a rogue nor a thief; and if I am something worse, it is he that has made me so, and it is he that shall suffer for it.'

There was a short silence, and then Reeves, in a hesitating way, asked, 'What was the plan you were thinking of, Jim?'

'This; he'll have to pass between the banks at Gordon's Shaft, and I thought of getting Slogger Dawson to join us two, and the three of us would stop him; throw something over his head; drag him up the bank, and throw him down the shaft. It has been out of use these twelve years, and hardly ever a soul goes near it. That's no mad, neck-risking plan, is it?'

'Well, no; an old mine-shaft tells no tales,' said Reeves, in a dubious tone. 'I—I could disguise myself?'

'Yes, if you liked, you could blacken your face, and shove on a suit of my work-

ing clothes ; then if any clue was to be got hold of, it would be thought that we were three workmen.'

'When he was missed, you would very likely be suspected of having had something to do with his disappearance ; you know how you have talked about him,' said Reeves, still speaking in a stammering, agitated manner.

'Yes ; and I know what you are driving at now, too,' answered Harrison, sneering ; 'but you may make your mind easy on that score. If I was to be taken in connexion with the job, I wouldn't try to save myself at the expense of others ; and I think I may answer for Slogger, having too much of the bull-dog in him to do a thing of that kind.'

'But he would want his share of the money?' said Reeves, questioningly.

'He needn't know how much there was ; if you gave him a couple of hundred, he

would think that a lump ; especially as I won't speak of money to him. It will be out of hatred to Grainger that he will come.'

'Well, I suppose "Needs must when the devil drives," Jim, and I am horribly hard up ; still—still you know this is a terrible thing.'

'To me it is a glorious thing !' exclaimed Harrison, exultantly.

'Ah, but you should think before going to such a length as that, Jim ; you had better be content with what I proposed.'

'No, never !' he exclaimed passionately ; and starting to his feet as he spoke. 'Think of it ! I never think of aught else. I think of it, and dream of it ; dream that I have him in my power ; that I laugh at his prayers for mercy, and gloat over his looks of agony ; and I'll make my dream true. I'll hiss in his ear that it's me that has got him ; that his hour has come, and he must

leave all his fine things and die like a dog ; die that instant unwarned and unprepared, so that hell will be staring him in the face. That's revenge, man ; what would all the money in the world be to that ? He is full of life and loves it, and he'll fight for it, and try to beg for it ; but I'll strangle the words in his throat, and dash him down, let him struggle how he will ; he had no mercy, and he shall have none.'

He dropped into his seat with foam gathering on his lips, and his features twitching convulsively, and appeared about to fall into a fit of some kind ; but hastily gulping down a glass of brandy that Reeves filled out for him, he recovered himself somewhat, and at the end of a few minutes spoke again.

'Look here, Reeves,' he said, 'there is no use in having any more talk about this. It will take quite three to make sure work of it, and the question is, will you be a third

with Slogger and me? If you won't, I can easily get some one that will; only mind, as I said before, if you don't go with us you mustn't interfere in any other way; so now, in a word, will you join us or not?

'Well, as I said just now, I'm awfully hard up; and——'

'D—n it, man, don't prate so,' exclaimed Harrison, with a savage impatience.

'Will you join us, yes or no?'

The other paused for a few seconds with a sorely troubled look; and then pulling a coin from his pocket, said in a tone of resolve :—

'Well, I'll gamble for it, as I've done for most other things in my life. Heads I go with you; tails I don't.'

He spun the coin as he spoke, and both watched it eagerly, and on its fall simultaneously exclaimed, 'Heads!'

'Yes; heads it is,' said Reeves, heaving a long breath. 'It seems I am to be with

you ; and that being decided, we have only to settle details.'

* * * * *

The following night was wet, dark, and windy ; and under such circumstances, the spot known as 'Gordon's Shaft' was about as gloomy an one as could well be imagined. The 'Shaft,' as will have been gathered from Harrison's remarks about it, was that of a disused and exhausted coal-pit, and it was known to be one of the deepest in that part of the country. It was an extensive pit, and had yielded largely in its day ; and its banks—made up not only of the refuse that had accumulated during the whole time of its own working, but also, since its disuse, of large additions from neighbouring ironstone mines, around which space had, from time to time, been required for the erection of forges and machinery—attained to the proportions of moderate-sized

hills. They were on both sides of the road leading from Mount Pleasant to the Railway Station; and their bases, sloping down, narrowed it considerably at the point at which it passed between them, while their height and blackness heavily overshadowed it. The prospect immediately around them was wild and bleak; on their tops the wind, when low, seemed to be always moaning; when high, always howling; and when in the night-time the passing breeze set old chains and pulleys creaking and rattling, others beside ignorant pitmen would have thought that there was something ghostly and gibbet-like in their sound, and have mended their pace as they passed between the frowning banks. As the mouth of the shaft could only be reached by climbing the bank, it had not been considered necessary to fence it, though any person once on the top might easily have fallen in, since a bell-shaped hollow some

three yards in diameter sloped sharply down to the perpendicular opening.

Near to the shaft, and hidden from the road by a peak of the bank was one of those little beehive-shaped huts common about the Black Country; and within this hut Reeves, Harrison, and Slogger Dawson were seated, a little before midnight.

A tallow candle stuck against the wall gave a dim light in the place, and on the ground stood a stone bottle of spirits, of which they had evidently been partaking freely; but while the drink had served to give additional ferocity to the manner of the two workmen, had inflamed their faces, made their eyes bloodshot, and their voices and gestures vehemently fierce, it had given neither nerve nor the recklessness of intoxication to Reeves. He had carried out Harrison's suggestion of dressing in a suit of his clothes, and he had smeared his face with a view to giving it the appearance of

that of an unwashed workman ; and the latter circumstance, and the dimness of the light, had the effect of giving a peculiar ghastliness to the pallor with which nervousness had overspread his features. He was dull, and restless ; and altogether his air was that of a man who wished himself anywhere rather than where he was. His manner seemed to annoy the others, and especially Dawson ; who, handing the bottle to him with an impatient movement, exclaimed :—

‘ Here, sup again, man ; and take a good ’un, and see if it’ll put any life in you. I hate to see you sitting there like a death’s-head. You shouldn’t have come into a job like this if you didn’t feel up to it.’

‘ I *will* feel up to it, as I *have* come in to it,’ answered Reeves, but still speaking rather dolefully ; ‘ but, at the same time, I feel how serious a matter it is. So little

gives a clue sometimes ; and if we were to be found out——'

'Curse your croaking ; there you go again,' broke in Dawson. 'Just drop it ; we'll have no more of it. And just let me give you a piece of my mind ; you may turn out all right ; Jim knows more about you than I do, and I suppose he wouldn't have trusted you if he hadn't thought you safe ; but all the same it's my opinion that those who croak over a thing like this are very likely to croak *after* it ; but you won't if you are wise. A man might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb : for two murders as well as one ;—you understand. Not that I call what we are going to do now a murder. It will be doing society a service to put such a beast as that out of the way ; he isn't fit to live ; he is as great an enemy to the working classes as ever they had ; he has brought misery upon hundreds of families, and tried to grind men down in

the dust, and crush every spark of independence and manliness out of them, and taken a pride in doing it. Look at Jim and me here ; we were as steady and well-doing a couple of fellows as need be, and now we are going about like a pair of vagabonds ; marked men, black-listed to every employer in the Masters' Union—and all through him. He has done that for us both, and worse still for Jim, and we are going to put his light out for it ; other people might call it murder, but we don't.'

During this speech Harrison had been sitting with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands ; but looking up as the other finished, and giving vent to a grating laugh, exclaimed, ' No, we call it justice, the wild justice of revenge, you know ; we make ourselves both judges and executioners.' He stopped abruptly in a listening attitude, and then after a brief silence, spoke again in a quick, energetic

tone: 'The train is coming in,' he said, 'I caught her whistle as she ran into the cutting; the time for action is at hand; and mind, Reeves, whatever you think there must be no flinching when it comes. Now once more, do we all quite understand how it is to be done? As it is pitch-dark, he'll drive through here at little more than a walk, for fear of running into the bank; you, Reeves, must jump out and stop the pony, while Dawson and I drag him out, muffle his head, and get him up the bank. You must make the pony fast to something as quickly as you can, and follow us up to give us a hand if we can't manage him without your help, though we won't call upon you to put your hands on him unless we really want you; we'll spare your delicate conscience as far as we can—is that understood and agreed upon?' Each answered in the affirmative, and Harrison went on: 'Very well, then, let us go and take up a position; the

train must be about in the station by this time. I dare say he's thinking how near home he is, but he little knows it's his long home.'

As he spoke he blew out the candle, thrust it into the neck of the bottle, and stepping out flung the latter into the bell-mouth of the shaft, down which they heard it plunge. Then they began to descend the bank, and Reeves took the opportunity of their being in straggling order to whisper to Harrison: 'About the money, you know, Jim?'

'Didn't you say it would be in a cash-box he would have in a gig?' the other whispered back.

'Yes; but then ——'

'Then take the box away altogether, and let Dawson have the two hundred after you have found ways to open it,' interrupted Harrison, impatiently.

'All right,' said Reeves; and then the

three went on in silence until they stood on the edge of the roadway; but still completely hidden from view in the black shadow of the bank.

They stood for some minutes without a word being uttered, and then, in an eager, excited whisper, Harrison exclaimed, 'There he comes; don't you catch the flicker of the gig-lamps, and, hark! there is the sound of the wheels. Stand ready; let there be no hesitation, mind, and now not another word till we've grappled him.' By the movement of the lights they could accurately note his approach, and time their rush. As the vehicle came opposite to them they dashed out, and Reeves brought up the pony with a jerk that threw it on its haunches, the other two fastening upon their victim as he threw up his arms to try and save himself from falling backward. Before he could utter a cry, they had enveloped his head in a heavy rug, and the

next minute were dragging him up the bank. He struggled desperately ; but Harrison, who had him by the throat, and who was quite beside himself with passion, and felt all the strength which hatred is capable of giving, half throttled him, so that his efforts to free himself soon began to grow weak.

On Harrison's face there was a look of demoniacal rage, and his voice was thick and broken as, in a tone of savage triumph, he growled out, ' Yes ; you'd like to get away, wouldn't you ? You'd make a rare high bid to be out of our clutches, I'll be bound ; but all the money in England wouldn't save you now. You had your turn when you refused to give the shelter I begged for my dead and gone wife that would have been alive now if you'd have let her have it. I'm having my turn now. I told you then I would have your life for hers, and I'm going to keep my

'No,' shouted Harrison, with another great oath ; 'I'll make sure work.'

As he spoke he went and took up a large piece of timber that was lying near, and was again advancing, when the rug fell from the head of the clinging man, who, with a voice made piercing by the horror of the situation, cried out :—

'What has The Parson done, boys?'

As that cry met his ears, Harrison let fall the piece of timber, and staggering back as if struck, hoarsely exclaimed, 'It is The Parson!'

CHAPTER V.

MR. REEVES MAKES HIMSELF AN
EDGED TOOL.

THE possibility that by prompt action he might rescue the victim of his mistake from the appalling position in which he was placed, aroused all the wild energy of Harrison's character, and enabled him to shake off the paralysing effects of surprise.

'For God's sake, hold on, sir,' he cried, in a voice that, though betraying great agitation, was still clear and decisive; 'I'll be with you in one half minute.'

As he spoke he bounded away in the direction of the hut, and a few hasty

strides brought him to a spot, where, stretching between two 'uprights,' there had been left a length of some twenty feet of the wire rope that had formerly been used in drawing the skips to bank. When right under it he could just detect its outline, and springing up he grasped it and brought his whole weight upon it with a violent jerk. It had only been held by a bulge in itself that prevented it slipping through the guide ring on one of the uprights, and Harrison's exertion of strength proved more than sufficient to force this ring from the rotten timber, for he came heavily to the ground with the rope in his hands. In an instant he was on his feet again, and, dragging the rope after him, rushed up to Dawson, who, during the minute that this had taken to enact, had stood motionless from surprise.

'Here, man, rouse thee!' he exclaimed,

shaking him by the shoulder, 'rouse thee and bear a hand. See.'

He had drawn the rope to him, and as he uttered the last word brought the ends of it under the eyes of his companion. Hanging to the one and forming a good handle was the guide ring, while at the other was the large wrought-iron hook which when working the rope had been attached to the skip chain.

'Do thou hold on to this for dear life,' he went on, placing the ring end in his hands, 'and I'll get the hook under his foot; thou understands.'

The other nodded; and then Harrison, holding the rope and taking with him the piece of timber with which, when he had supposed him to be Grainger, he had been going to thrust The Parson from his last frail hold, began to slide down the hollow to the mouth of the shaft.

He had spoken and acted with the

utmost rapidity. In a couple of seconds from his coming back with the rope, he was letting himself down to the mouth of the shaft. The words, 'If you are men, help me ; my strength is failing,' had scarcely passed The Parson's lips, when he was beside him.

'One second longer, sir,' he said ; and as he spoke he contrived by an herculean effort to place the piece of timber across a segment of the opening of the shaft.

'Now, sir,'—he went on, getting his disengaged arm under The Parson's armpits,—'gently does it. I'll bear your weight. Throw your arms over this timber. One at a time ; there, that's it ! Now hold hard. I'm going to lower a skip hook ; feel for it with your feet. Do you understand, sir ?' Harrison resumed, speaking close to The Parson's ear, and in a distinct, emphatic tone, for he saw

that consciousness as well as strength was failing him.

The Parson made no answer in words, but the other could tell that he had understood, and was acting upon his instruction; and, after a minute of awful suspense, he felt him get his foot into the hook. He instantly called to Dawson, and with a steady pull they brought the rope up so that it in a great measure supported The Parson's weight without having jerked him. Having unwound The Parson's arms from the timber, and guided his hands to the rope, he again signalled to Dawson, and in the same steady, unjerking fashion they began to haul up. In a few seconds they had drawn The Parson clear of the bell-mouth, and then with a heavy sigh of relief Harrison exclaimed, 'There, you are all right now, sir.'

But The Parson made no answer — he had swooned.

‘He’s fainted outright,’ said Dawson ; ‘and I don’t know as it isn’t as well as he had ; he’ll get over that, and it’ll give us all the more chance to clear away.’

‘You go, I’ll stop and see him round,’ answered Harrison, who had already raised his head, and was unloosing his neck-band.

‘Very well,’ said Dawson ; and after a few hurried words to arrange a plan for their meeting again he went away, leaving the other two alone on the bank.

Dipping his pocket-handkerchief into a little rain-pool within reach, Harrison sprinkled The Parson’s face, and this and the cold air blowing soon recovered him.

He stared wildly about him for an

instant, and stammered out, 'Why—why.' Then he seemed to recollect himself. Rising to his feet he fixed his eyes on Harrison, and speaking in a tone that, though stern, had still as much of sorrow as anger in it, said, 'Harrison, I wouldn't have thought you could have been such a cowardly, blood-thirsty ruffian.'

'I didn't think myself at one time I could have been so blood-thirsty,' he answered, sullenly; 'but it wasn't your blood I thirsted for, but Grainger's. If I am a blood-thirsty ruffian, it is he that has made me so; you know the wrong he did me.'

'I do, and I admit that it was a cruel one; but your insane brooding over it makes it appear greater than it was; though, even supposing he was the worst you think him, you are only attempting to put yourself on a par with him by taking the course you are doing. Ven-

gance, and, above all, the vengeance of blood, is not for man.'

'It shall be mine on him, anyway!' exclaimed the other passionately. 'And look you here, sir, if it had been any one else than you that I made this mistake over, I wouldn't have stirred a finger to save them unless they had sworn not to breathe a word about it. I suppose you you will speak of it?'

'I shall; I will acquaint the proper authorities of the attack upon myself, and I will specially warn Mr. Grainger.'

'You may tell him at the same time that warning won't save him; that, warned or unwarned, on guard or off it, I'll have him sooner or later. If I was taken for this night's work, and got twenty years for it, I would come back and have my revenge on him. I'll try not to be taken, but if I am I won't blame you. I'm more sorry than I'll try to say for what has

happened to you through my mistake. I can't expect you to forgive me ; but, perhaps, some day, sir, you'll try not to think more hardly of me than you can help. I wasn't an altogether bad sort of a fellow once—before—my wife—I'll go.'

His voice died out in a tremble, and he turned hastily away ; but he had not gone half-a-dozen paces, when The Parson called to him to stop.

'Come, Harrison,' he said, stepping up to him as he came to a standstill ; 'I don't like to see you go away in that spirit. You were a good fellow once, and you would be so still, if you would only be your better self, and give up the pursuit of these mad schemes of vengeance ; you see how terribly they may miscarry. If I agree to say nothing of what has occurred to-night, will you promise me, on your honour as a man, to give up these designs against Grainger ?

I speak, not as interceding for him, but for your good, believe me.'

'I do believe you, sir,' Harrison answered: 'and I believe, too, that it *would* be for my good to give them up; but I *can't*, and I won't promise.

He paused for a moment, and then, drawing himself up to his full height, and raising his clenched hands above his head, went on, 'Mark what I say, sir, and you'll remember it afterwards. I don't know how or when it may be; but I feel as certain as that I am standing here, that I shall take his life; that I shall drag him down to his death with these hands, if I go to my own death in doing it.'

He started away as he spoke, but again The Parson detained him. 'I would that I could persuade you,' he said; 'but I see that the attempt is hopeless. For what has passed to-night, I

forgive you freely so far as personal feeling is concerned; but I will perform my duty. I cannot arrest you myself——'

'No, sir; I wouldn't allow even you to take me so easily as all that; and as I don't mean to be taken at all if I can help it, I'll go.'

The Parson made no further attempt to stay him, and, as soon as he had vanished in the darkness, began to grope his own way down the bank.

The circumstances that had led to The Parson being mistaken for Grainger were very simple. He, too, had been in London, and had seen the other there, and they had arranged to return by the same train. At the last minute, however, business had turned up which prevented Grainger from adhering to the arrangement, and when acquainting The Parson with this, he had told him to use the gig which would be waiting.

He had done so, with what result we have seen. On the following day he made a statement of his adventure to the nearest magistrate, and warrants were issued against Dawson and Harrison; but the efforts of the local police to execute the warrants proved unavailing. Neighbouring railway stations, and the roads leading to adjoining towns, were watched, and the houses of the associates of the men were searched; but the dwelling of the sporting postmaster of Oringford was *not* searched. In his deposition, The Parson spoke of the third man, whom he was unable to recognise as a workman, and, of course, it never occurred to any one to connect the unusual circumstances of Reeves giving his housekeeper a week's holiday with any idea of his sheltering the men who were 'wanted.' In his house they lay in safe concealment, until the police, acting upon the conclusion that they must have 'got

the start of them,' in the interval between the commission of the outrage and the issue of the warrant, grew slack in their watch of the immediate neighbourhood—then they got away in a canal boat, the bargee of which was a friend of Dawson's.

When Grainger was informed of what had taken place, he seemed to experience more of annoyance at The Parson having been subjected to such usage than of fear for himself. Indeed, he treated the matter with such comparative indifference that The Parson, in a slightly piqued tone, asked, 'Do not you believe in the reality of the danger?'

'Oh, yes,' he answered, 'I believe in it now; but I am not going to let it cow me. I may be a bully—people say I am; but I'm ——'

He hesitated, and The Parson, smiling as he spoke, took up the sentence, 'But

you are no coward, axiomatic philosophy notwithstanding.'

'Well, I wouldn't let the fear of meeting any one man make my life a burden to me.'

'Of course not ; I did not intend my question to imply anything of that kind ; but being warned, you will take precautions ?'

'Well, I shall avoid such spots as Gordon's Shaft as much as I can, while, if I have to go near them by myself I will lay on a revolver and keep a sharp lookout ; and if he does put in an appearance I shall hope to be able to put a bullet in his head before he can do any damage.'

The cool ferocity with which this was said irritated The Parson ; but, as he could not well say anything against what was after all only a measure of self-defence, he perforce remained silent, and the conversation dropped.

The Parson's adventure, of course, caused a sensation among the inhabitants of Mount Pleasant, though just at the time of its occurrence it was scarcely the god-send as subject-matter for gossip that it would have been in a general way. The Mount had still its play to watch, and incidents in that were at hand to the full as unexpected and startling as the outrage at Gordon's Shaft.

Apart from his untrustworthiness in essentials Mr. Reeves was anything but a business-like postmaster. He was under the necessity of rising betimes to sort the letters for the morning delivery, and this irked him greatly. Most of his evenings were spent in the smoke-room of the Dog and Partridge. When once esconced there he rarely moved till closing time, and during the hours of his stay he drank and smoked in a style that showed that he did not 'think of his head in the morning.'

When morning came it found him—as he mildly put it—seedy ; that is to say, suffering from drunken headache, and heaviness, and ill-temper. He would curse his housekeeper when she called him, lie in bed till the latest possible moment, and then come down half dressed and unwashed, and sit down to his sorting with a cigar in his mouth and a tumbler of brandy and soda-water at his side. One morning, about a month after the occurrence at Gordon's Shaft, he was going through his work in this style when his eye fell upon a letter the sight of which had the effect of instantly startling him out of the apathetic manner that had characterised his movements up to that point. Letting fall the letters in his hand, he snatched up this one, and examining it closely, muttered, ' It is the handwriting ; there can be no mistake about that ; it's queer, too, I can't understand the date.

However, I suppose Grainger must have a look at it—after me.'

He put it aside until he had rapidly despatched the remaining portion of his sorting, and then retiring with it into an inner room, he, by an easy process, opened it, without damaging the envelope. As he read the letter, a look of the most intense surprise came over his face. 'Well, by G—d,' he exclaimed aloud when he had finished it, 'this is a turn up. Couldn't the great gun be had over it?' he went on dropping his voice. 'To keep it back altogether would do it pat, as he won't be thinking of pulling it off so soon as that; but when he was floored he would be almost certain to hear that such a letter had been sent, and then it would be warehawk for me. No, I won't chance keeping it back; it's not quite good enough for that; it doesn't cut both ways, like the other affair; it would injure him, but it

wouldn't profit me ; and though revenge is sweet, if it can be got safely, I don't see the beauty of risking liberty where there's nothing substantial to be gained. And yet it is a pity that such an opportunity of putting a spoke in his wheel should be missed altogether ; surely it could be made use of somehow ; just let me see.'

He paused in a musing attitude for some minutes, and then a smile of satisfaction broke over his features, and, slapping his hand upon his thigh, he exclaimed, ' Yes, that'll be the ticket ; I don't know that it won't be better than keeping it back. He'll try to draw it as fine as he can within the time, and that is where the pull will lie ; we shall do him right on the post.'

He took up the letter again, looked at it intently for a minute, then spread it before him, and taking pen and paper, carefully copied from it, half-a-dozen times over, the word June. Having done

this, he proceeded to operate upon the words, changing them from June to July. The first two attempts showed some slight signs of the work of alteration ; but the third, more successful, presented no appearance in the least degree likely to attract the notice of an ordinary observer.

‘That’s about it,’ he said, holding up the paper and looking at it with the air of a man proud of his achievement ; ‘just one more try.’

‘Aye, that’s it,’ he went on, when he had again successfully made the change. ‘Now for the shade of the ink. Let me see ——,’ I think he continued, muttering the name of an ink-manufacturer ; ‘that’s about their shade in the time, and I know they do a trade there. At any rate theirs will do to work upon.’

He went to a cabinet, and from a row of bottles in it took one from which he filled a small inkstand, so shaped that

while it only held about three or four pens-full, a pen could be well dipped in it. He added one drop of a yellowish-looking fluid from a vial, stirred the mixture gently for a few seconds, then taking a clean pen, tried it on the paper he had been copying upon. When the writing was dry, he compared it with that of the letter, and was evidently pleased at the result.

‘That’s got it,’ he muttered; ‘it would be longish odds against any one detecting a difference there, even if they were looking for it, which he won’t be. He wouldn’t think a *tool* would play him such a trick as this, but he’ll find me an edged-tool before he’s done with me.

‘However, now to do the thing itself,’ he muttered on, as he spread the letter before him again, and having transformed the June in it to July, with a skill that left no trace of his handiwork, he finally proceeded to copy it out in full in his own

handwriting. When he had finished, he locked the copy in a drawer of the cabinet from which he had taken the ink, burnt the sheet of paper on which he had been practising, returned the original to its envelope, and, taking it with him, went up to his room, and having made a hasty toilette, set out for Grainger's house.

On sending in his name he was at once admitted to the presence of the great man, who greeted him with a cold,—‘ Well, what now ?’

‘ This,’ replied Reeves, laconically, as he placed the letter on the table, ‘ I didn’t know whether you would care about it or not.’

Grainger picked up the letter and as his eye fell upon the hand-writing of the address, he turned deadly pale, and despite his efforts at self-control, his voice shook as he answered,—‘ Wait a few minutes, I’ll tell you when I come back ; I’m just going into the next room.’

The instant he was alone, he tore open the letter and glanced at its contents, which, to judge by his face, were of a nature so unlooked-for as to be utterly bewildering; but soon the expression of astonishment gave way to one of dismay, and dropping into a seat he gasped out,—‘Well, this beats all, it’s a lot worse than the other affair, and that’s getting to be as troublesome as it well can. Everybody seems to have got the better of me, and everything to have gone against me, of late. Such luck is enough to make one superstitious. It would have been just in keeping with it if those scoundrels had caught me at Gordon’s Shaft, and if things go on in this style I shall begin to think it wouldn’t have mattered much if they had.’

At this point he fell into a moody silence; but presently his face brightened somewhat, and speaking softly to himself he went on,—‘But after all the coppers

haven't been *all* tails with me, and the game isn't altogether on one side even in this; I have got hold of the information, and as I can keep that from others, I dare say I can work it about the time.'

He rose with a more composed countenance, and going in to Reeves, said in an off-handed tone,—

'No, this needn't go on, and keep your eyes open for any others; there won't be any just yet, but there may be after a while, and take care that none slip—you understand?'

'Yes; I'm awake,' the other answered; and as he left the house, he mentally added, Wide awake, my friend, as you'll find before all is over.

He went straight back to his shop, and going to his desk, at once wrote the following letter, making use of a large straggling school-boy-like hand, and putting in various misspellings,—

'DEAR HARRY,—If you git this all rite, send us your propper adress, as I want to tell you something perticular about that as I was to rite to you about, if anything turned up.

'Your Old Pal

'JOE.'

In the same disguised hand he addressed this letter to

Mr. HENRY JAMES

Care of The Landlord

of The Highland Mary,

Millwall,

London.

And in the evening he stamped and sent it away with his other letters. On the first morning upon which an answer to this letter could have reached him, he looked eagerly among the letters for one addressed to himself, but none came, and each morn-

ing for a week after he looked, with the same result.

‘ Ah, well !’ he mused, as he finished his sorting on the last of these occasions, ‘ I suppose he has made a move, and I must give up that part of it as a bad job. After all, though, it doesn’t matter so *very* much ; this game isn’t like the one at the Shaft, it will pretty well play itself ; it turns on the question of time, and that I’ve gained by the aid of this little friend in need ;’ and, with a triumphant smile, he held up his pen.

His reasonings on the subject appeared however to be more self-satisfactory than his feelings. He was evidently disappointed and discontented, and feeling less inclined than usual for business, he closed his shop early and went off to the Dog and Partridge. On entering the smoke-room he found a number of the *habitués* already assembled, and conversing with an eagerness that

induced him to exclaim,—‘Holloa! what’s on the board now?’

‘Haven’t you heard anything?’ asked one.

‘Nothing particular,’ he said, seating himself.

‘Well, I don’t know that it is *very* particular,’ answered the other man; ‘still it is out of the everyday way—Miss Wilkin-son has eloped with young Vernon.’

‘Oh, has she?’ said Reeves, coolly; ‘well it is as well to make sure of the bird in the hand when you have *missed* the one in the bush; though I don’t see the need for an elopement, but there, your beauties—or at any rate, most of them—will make talk, if it is possible.’

‘I should fancy it was on account of his family,’ said one of the others.

‘Perhaps so,’ said Reeves, with a shrug of the shoulders; ‘I suppose there *are* men that are that much afraid of their families.’

'I suppose it's true enough?' said a man who had not hitherto taken any part in the discourse.

'Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that,' replied he who had first spoken. 'Her brother was with the Black Diamonds performing at Lockhampton, and didn't get back till this morning when he found her gone. Of course he looked about, and in her room he picked up a note from Vernon to her, telling her to meet him down by the iron bridge, and they would settle everything. On the strength of this he went to the Vernons, and they told him that their son was missing too, and that from a letter he had left they supposed Florence and he had gone off together. I had it from a fellow-clerk of Wilkinson, so you may depend it is not far out.'

Nor was it, for the statement substantially embodied the circumstances as

Dick Wilkinson had told them to his fellow clerks.

The elopement continued to be the subject of discourse during greater part of the night, but Reeves took no further part in it. His mind was running upon his own affairs, and was still so intent upon them as he walked home a little after midnight, that he failed to see a formidable-looking figure that, keeping in the shadow, dogged his footsteps. Stepping lightly it followed him at the distance of a few paces, until he was just turning into the passage in which his private door was situated, when it bounded forward, and, grasping him by the shoulders, turned him round. The suddenness of the action and the sight of the face that met his completely unnerved him for the moment, and he looked as though but for the strong grasp upon him he would have fallen as he stammered out, 'Good God, Jim,

you here? Why, you must be a mad-man !'

'Well, perhaps, as to that ; but anyhow take me in and get me something to eat and drink, I'm pretty near famished.'

'But, you know——'

'Oh d---n, "buts" between pals,' interrupted the other in a tone of savage irony, 'let us get in.'

Reeves saw that it was no use to remonstrate, and so taking out his latch-key, he answered, 'All right ; just stay a minute till I get a light and make sure that the old woman is in bed.'

He went in, and in a short time came to the door again and beckoned to the other, who immediately entered and seated himself, and then in a loud voice exclaimed, 'Where's the grub? Come, out with it; I feel as if I could eat the side of a house.'

'Hush, Harrison! don't speak so loud, you'll bring ruin on us both!' exclaimed

Reeves, in the utmost alarm. 'Did you——'

'Look here,' the other broke in, 'I'm not going to say what I did or didn't till I've had something to eat; so let's have what you've got, and hold your jaw till I've had a rough filling, and then I'll be ready to talk, listen, or do.'

Reeves saw that there was nothing for it but to humour his unexpected and unwelcome guest. Going to a cupboard he brought out a loaf, a piece of cold boiled beef, and a couple of bottles of ale, and placed them before Harrison, who immediately fell to. While he was eating Reeves had an opportunity of observing him, and the result of his observation was of anything but a comforting nature, as his appearance, coupled with his manner, led him to the conclusion that he was there with the intention, as he phrased it to himself, of 'putting the screw on him.'

‘Ah, that’s better,’ said Harrison, at length, pushing away his plate; ‘now let us have a drop of brandy.’

Reeves brought a bottle, and was going to fill out a glass, when Harrison stopped him, saying, ‘Here, put it on the table; I’ll help myself;’ and seizing the bottle, he poured out half a tumbler full and drank it off.

‘There, I begin to feel my own man again,’ he said, smacking his lips as he put down the glass; ‘and now I’ll put you out of your misery. You think, because I look a bit dirty and jaded, and my clothes are poor and travel-stained, that I am hard up, and mean making you help me,—but you are mistaken. I wouldn’t squeeze you if I was hard up, but I’m not: look here;’ and as he spoke he put his hand in his pocket and drew out a bank-note and some gold.

‘Oh, never mind, it’s scarcely worth talking about,’ he went on, putting down Reeves, as he was about to stammer out a

denial of having entertained such thoughts. 'Now, did I what? Did I get your letter? I suppose you were going to ask. Well, I did, my old pal Joe, but only yesterday morning. I had been on the spree, and the landlord couldn't find me before; and as I didn't know but what even a day might be of consequence, I came right away. I trained it to Stonebury, and walked the rest of the distance. I kept myself snug till about closing time, and then sneaked up towards the Dog and Partridge, expecting to drop on you, but you wasn't there; and so I had to hide away again till to-night; and here I am.'

'Well, I must say again it was a mad proceeding.'

'Well, it was reckless certainly,' answered Harrison, with a self-complacent toss of the head; 'but as it happens, it has turned out trumps.'

'It will turn out *hulks*, if you don't

watch it,' said Reeves, speaking in a bolder tone than he had hitherto adopted.

'Oh, no, it won't,' answered Harrison, with a swaggering confidence of tone that irritated the other, who, with a slight sneer, said, 'You seem to forget that there is a warrant out against you.'

'No, I don't,' answered Harrison, in the same aggravating manner. 'I shall let myself be taken on it to-morrow, for it will only be a form; I shall have a friend in court. The great Mr. Grainger will not only speak for me, but he'll get The Parson not to speak against me.'

'Do you say you were on the spree for some days before you came down?' said Reeves, eyeing him askance.

'Yes; and I feel the brandy getting into my head a little now, but it isn't a case of D. T. for all that.'

'What do you mean, then?' asked Reeves.

‘That’s my affair ; but I may tell you this much, I mean to stay down here—and now what is it you want to tell me particulars about?’

‘I don’t know that I do want after this,’ sneered Reeves. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t care about hurting Grainger now?’

‘Wouldn’t I though?’ exclaimed the other, with flashing eyes, ‘you show me the way, that’s all.

‘But you said ——’

‘Never mind what I said ; what is this business ? come to the point.’

There was no mistaking his earnestness, and Reeves, with a satisfied look, went and brought the copy of the letter, which we saw him make, and putting it into Harrison’s hands, said, ‘There, read that, it’ll explain itself.’ He seemed to enjoy the expression of astonishment that came over the other’s face as he read ; and when he saw

that he had finished, he asked, 'What do you think of that?'

'Glorious!' replied Harrison, when his surprise would allow him to speak; 'glorious in every way!'

'More glorious than even you think,' said Reeves, smiling; 'for I made the June into July in the original before giving it up to the big man.'

'And a good move too; it will perhaps spoil his calculations when he gets up to his devil's work, as of course he will.'

'That was my idea, and I thought that as you were in London you could have been on the look out at the *right* time.'

'For that purpose I'll go back about the time, and if he does any oracle-working or hoodwinking in that quarter after I've got the start of him, he'll deserve all he'll get by it. But why didn't you let the letter go to its destination? he couldn't have told you anything about stopping it.'

‘No, but I fancy he gives me credit for being too sharp not to have noticed such a letter, or not to have understood that it could not but be injurious to him; and when he found himself knocked over, he would have stung where he could—here.’ And as he finished speaking he touched himself on the breast.

‘Yes, I suppose *you* have to be careful how you deal with him, and any way I don’t blame you. It’ll be a pleasure to me to have a hand in it, and some day soon I may want you to give me a hand in a matter that will set you free from him. Not another Gordon’s Shaft job,’ he went on, noticing the look of alarm that came on the other’s face, ‘a safer one than that as far as *we* are concerned.’

‘Do you mean——’

‘I’ll say no more now, I’ll have a lie down on the couch here for an hour or two, then be off, and later you’ll be hear-

ing the surprising intelligence that Burn-my-heart-out has been taken.'

Reeves sat by him till a little after four, and then woke him saying, 'Come, Jim, it's gone four, you had better be going; the workmen will be stirring about just now, and it would never do for you to be seen leaving here.'

'All right,' he answered, rising; 'I'll just take a nip more brandy, and go. You'll be seeing me again,' he went on when he had drunk, 'I'll take to use the Dog and Partridge, and you can easily give me the tip if you want to see me in private.'

'All right, I will,' answered Reeves, opening the door as he spoke. He went to the top of the passage, glanced up and down the road, and seeing all clear, signalled to Harrison who came out, and with a hurried 'Good morning,' darted away in the darkness.

About noon a neighbouring tradesman, coming in for his paper, asked Reeves, 'Have you heard the news?'

'What news?' he asked in turn.

'Why, the police have got Burn-my-heart-out.'

'Have they, though?' he exclaimed, with well-affected surprise, 'where did they find him?'

'Why, here, openly walking about, as though he wanted to be taken; in fact, most of those who have seen him think that he did; they say he looks deucedly hard up, and as if he had been tramping; however, we shall see, he will be taken before the magistrates to-morrow.'

The examination resulted as Harrison had confidently asserted it would. The Parson came forward and said that even when he had applied for the warrant he had no vindictive feeling in the matter; on the contrary, he had felt sorry for him,

believing that he had suffered so much in body and mind as to be scarcely responsible for his actions. He had only desired to have him apprehended because he had still held out threats against Mr. Grainger; but he had promised him that morning to abandon his designs of violence, and from what he knew of him he had every confidence in his keeping his word, and therefore he trusted the magistrates would discharge him, especially as he had Mr. Grainger's permission to say that it was his wish that they should do so.

Mr. Grainger, who was favoured with a seat on the bench, simply said that such was his wish; and the magistrates, after a brief consultation, settled the case by binding Harrison to keep the peace, and the required sureties being immediately forthcoming he was discharged from custody.

The same day he gave the leading tailor of Oringford an order for an exten-

sive and stylish outfit of clothes, paying for them in advance, and he spent money freely among his old mates. This and other circumstances connected with his return gave rise to a good deal of talk and guess work ; but only for a few days, when all such minor topics were put in the shade by a discovery that created a most intense and painful excitement throughout the district.

CHAPTER VI.

WORSE THAN AN ELOPEMENT.

THE ordinary idea of things picturesque scarcely extends to canals—the real ‘silent highways’ of the days when steam-engines were not. And yet there is a good deal that is picturesque about some of them. They run through lovely rural districts, are bordered by sweet-smelling meadows, and crossed by pretty rustic bridges, from which village children, with pea-sticks as rods, and thread and pin by way of tackle, angle for the fish that can be seen playing about in their clear water, or darting for shelter under the soft, sedgy

fringing of their banks. But they are not all thus, and the Oringford and Stonebury Canal was an example of the opposite extreme. It had formerly been the chief means for the conveyance of the minerals of the district, and its course lay among pits, forges, coal-stacks, and wharves. Its water was thick, inky black, and impregnated by the stench of the refuse run into it from bordering works. Even the miners—and they were not *very* particular on such points—could make no part of it a bathing-place, and this perhaps accounted for their making it a receptacle for all their dead dogs. Its bridges were low, heavy, and dark, and gave forth most dismal echoes when anything passed under them; and altogether it was so black and gloomy that it might have been thought it would have repelled even those seeking death. But despair, we suppose, takes no note of such matters when it has reached

the supreme point, at which it urges its victims to plunge,

‘ Anywhere, anywhere, out of the world.’

Suicides in this canal were of frequent occurrence, and it was no very rare thing for passing coal-boats to wash up a body from its grimy depths ; and one morning, about a week after Jim Harrison’s re-appearance, one of the men in charge of a little fleet of these boats, happening to cast his eye in their wake, saw that they had started a body to the surface.

He jumped to the bank with a boat-hook in his hand, and calling to the driver to stop the horses, ran to the spot at which he had seen the body rise. It had partly sunk again, but his practised eye made it out, and at the first attempt he succeeded in hooking it, and the other two men having by this time come up they drew it on to the towing-path.

It was the body of a woman, with hair clotted, and garments reeking with the black ooze from the clammy hold of which the boats had started it; and features so swollen, and sodden, and discoloured, that those who had known them best in life might easily have failed to recognise them here.

'A woman again!' said the man who had first noticed it.

'Ay,' said the other, 'it generally is women; men mostly cuts their throats, or jumps down the pits, or summat of that sort. I ain't heard of any one missing, though, have you?'

'No, nor of no reward neither. Don't you remember when Bill Adams turned that one up three months back there was two pound reward? Howmsoever this poor thing can't help that; perhaps there ain't anybody to miss her, and that's what druv her to it.'

‘I should hardly think that ; she seems very well put on,’ answered the other, glancing at the dress ; ‘but if it’s people hereabout she belongs to, they’ve no idea it’s as bad as this, or we should have heard.’

‘Ah, well,’ said his companion, ‘we had better get some help, and carry her to the Dog and Partridge ; that’s the nearest public. Do you go and look for some one, and I’ll stand by her ;’ and as he spoke he drew out a cotton pocket-handkerchief and gently covered the face of the corpse.

In a short time the messenger returned with two other men bringing a board and some clean sacking, and taking up the body and covering it decently, they bore it to the Dog and Partridge, where it was laid in an outhouse.

‘Have you heard of any of the bank girls or men’s wives being missing ?’ asked one of the boatmen of the landlady.

'No,' she answered; 'but I should think by her clothes that she was something better than that.'

'Lor, bless you, ma'am!' exclaimed the man, 'they always puts their best things on to do it in; I suppose it's the nature o' women. I've pulled out over a dozen one time and another, and I have seen plenty more, and I noticed it particular; and besides, it's well known among us on the canal, isn't it?' he added, turning to his mate for corroboration.

'Yes, they mostly put on their best things when they are such as has best 'uns to put,' was the answer.

'Ay, I've heard of that, and, as far as that goes, I've noticed it, too, when they've been brought here,' said the landlady; 'but these clothes are better than a workwoman's best. This sort of silk,' she went on, touching the skirt of the dress,

‘isn’t paid for out of a working-man’s wages, let alone a bank girl’s. And look at this,’ she said, gently taking up a brilliantly set locket, that, in carrying the body, had been jolted out from the bosom, and now hung loosely secured by a necklet. ‘I’m not much of a judge of such things ; but—good heavens !—what’s this ?’

She had opened the locket, and this exclamation was elicited by the sight of the miniatures it enclosed.

‘Missing !’ she resumed, talking as much to herself as to the men ; ‘of course I know of some one missing ; but there was no thought of anything like this. Why, it’s Miss Wilkinson !’

‘Miss Wilkinson !’ exclaimed one of the men who had helped the boatmen to carry the body.

‘Yes, there is her own likeness and her brother’s in the locket, and I re-

member the dress now. Poor young lady ! and every one thinking she had eloped with that young Vernon, — the smooth-faced villain, he's murdered her ! I suppose it will turn out to be the old story. Poor girl ! that's what her good looks have brought her to !'

The police and coroner were communicated with, and the news of the finding of the body spread like wild-fire. Dick Wilkinson identified the body as that of his sister, and, with this point settled, the inquest was adjourned for two days, to give the police an opportunity of collecting and arranging information ; but without waiting for detailed evidence, the popular verdict condemned Sidney Vernon as the murderer. It was a conclusion from which even those who struggled against it could not escape. His mother and sister, on whom the blow fell with a crushing weight, sought rather to palliate

the deed than to attempt to persuade themselves that he was not guilty. For a brief space, indeed, they tried to buoy themselves with the desperate hope—and how deep their grief was when they could entertain such an idea as a hope, may be imagined—that the affair would turn out to be one, not of murder, but of double suicide. On the day following the discovery of Florence's body, they had the canal dragged, and could they have seen the body of the son and brother being carried to their home, the sight would have been so far welcome that they would have regarded it as the lesser of two terrible evils. But no body was found ; and the next day, when the inquest was resumed, there was left them no loop or hinge to hang a doubt upon.

Immense excitement and curiosity of course prevailed among all classes in the district. The large club-room in which

the inquest was held was crowded—chiefly by people from the Mount—the other rooms of the house were also filled, and numbers were gathered outside of it, eager to see the witnesses or gather up any scraps of information that might be floating about. Both Mrs. Vernon and Blanche were too much cast down by their grief to be able to take any practical step; but Grainger had instructed a solicitor to watch the proceedings on behalf of Sidney, who, it was taken as understood on all sides, was virtually, though not formally, accused.

Identity having been already proved, the first witnesses called upon this occasion were the boatmen who merely deposed to finding the body.

Next came the doctor who had made a *post-mortem* examination. He described the appearance of the body, and spoke positively as to drowning alone being the cause of death; saying in reply to the

solicitor that there were no marks of violence, and that the body had not been thrown into the water after death. Then, in answer to a question from the coroner, he stated that the deceased was pregnant.

This reply created a profound sensation among those present, and for a time the proceedings were stayed by the murmur of voices and exclamations of surprise and execration in which the words 'poor girl' and 'cowardly villain' predominated.

When silence was restored Dick Wilkinson was called. He looked very ill and grief-stricken, and he was greeted with a murmur of very sincerely felt sympathy. He spoke to the time at which he had last seen his sister alive, to his finding the note—which he produced—from Vernon, asking his sister to meet him at the iron bridge, to his in consequence going to the Vernons, and being told by Mrs. Vernon that her son had gone

off in the night, leaving an incoherent letter saying that there was a reason for his going; that she had concluded the reason was in some way connected with his sister, and supposed from what he—Wilkinson—now told her that it simply meant eloping with her.

‘And was that your idea, too, at the time?’ asked the coroner.

‘At that time, yes,’ he answered.

‘Were you aware then that your sister was *enceinte*?’

‘I was not,’ he answered, his face flushing painfully. ‘I never dreamt of such a thing.’

‘Then having no knowledge of that, on what ground did you suppose they had eloped?’ asked the solicitor for the Vernons.

‘I knew that his family objected to the match, and thought that he had persuaded her to go away and marry him quietly,

on that account—for his own sake, lest, if his people said anything to her, she should break with him altogether, for he knew her to be a proud girl.’

‘You speak of his family “objecting to the match;” do you mean to allege that there was an engagement between them?’ questioned the lawyer.

‘There was no formal engagement,’ answered Wilkinson, ‘but he sought her as a lover, and wished her to become engaged to him; it lay solely with her that they were not engaged?’

‘That you infer?’

‘That I know from what they have said themselves; from things that each has said to me in the presence of the other.’

‘Excuse me putting the question, I know it is a painful one, but I have a duty to perform,—Do you hold that he was the seducer of your sister?’

‘Certainly I do, now.’

‘But is not such a supposition irreconcilable with your statement that she declined even to become engaged to him, though he solicited her to do so?’

‘My idea was, not that she declined from any coldness of feeling towards him personally, but because she guessed that his relatives did not consider her good enough for him. She was wayward, passionate, and impulsive, and often acted in ways that to a more methodical nature would not appear reconcilable with each other.’

‘Previous to her disappearance had you noticed any change in her manner—anything, for instance, that, supposing Mr. Vernon had not disappeared at the same time, might, on the discovery of her death and the condition she was in, have led you to think that she had committed suicide?’

‘I noticed that of late she seemed very unhappy and uncertain in her moods; if Mr. Vernon had not disappeared, I *might*

have thought she had committed suicide, though I should still have known that it was through him,—that he was her seducer.'

'But is it not a fact that latterly her manner towards him was cold,—was such as evinced a desire to be rid of his attentions?'

'It is a fact that latterly her manner towards him was very changeable, sometimes cold, sometimes markedly the reverse, as if she wished to make amends for her coldness. His manner to her varied in much the same way, being sometimes gloomy and distant, at others impulsively affectionate. In short, their bearing was such as I would have expected to find it had I known then what I know now.'

No more questions were asked, and Wilkinson stood down amid renewed murmurs of sympathy.

When he had taken up a stand among

the spectators, the lawyer, addressing the coroner, said that he had the letter which young Vernon had left; as it related chiefly to private family affairs he could not read it in full; but if the jury were agreeable he would let the coroner read it, so that he might be in a position to assure them whether or not he—the solicitor—spoke fairly in saying that it afforded no evidence to connect the writer with the death of Miss Wilkinson. To this the jury consented, and he then handed the letter to the coroner. It ran :—

‘DEAR MOTHER,—I cannot stay here any longer, you will soon come to know why. I could not bear to be the mock, and scorn, and *pity* of the neighbourhood. I am going away, I know not where; nor would I tell you if I did, as I want to entirely unlink my life from yours and Blanche’s, and all old associations. I have come to this

determination suddenly, and yet not without thought, not without being convinced that I shall be benefiting rather than injuring you by doing so. I can see now how useless and unstable I have been—and am. Blanche's marriage will place both her and you in an assured position, and I now enclose a cheque for a thousand pounds, which poor Harding would insist upon leaving with me in case of any emergency arising; knowing what his thoughts and feelings were, you need not scruple to use it. Praying for every blessing upon you and Blanche, I say good-bye to you both, and remain your unhappy, ne'er-do-well, but still *loving* son,

‘SIDNEY.’

When he had looked through this letter, the coroner, turning to the jury, observed that he quite agreed that, technically speaking, the letter could not in itself

be taken as evidence as to how the deceased came by her death. 'At the same time,' he went on, 'supposing a man had committed a murder, and was going to fly, he would not be likely to let even his friends know *why* he had disappeared; and remembering this, it was for the jury to say how far the first part of the letter,' which, with the consent of the solicitor, he read aloud at this point, 'when taken in conjunction with other things, would weigh with them in forming a verdict.'

The next witnesses called were a young man and woman, who spoke to having seen Sidney Vernon and the deceased by the iron bridge walking towards the towing-path. They had passed them, and noticed that they were quarrelling, both looking excited, and Vernon speaking in a loud and angry tone.

Another couple of sweethearts deposed to meeting them later on the towing-path,

to Miss Wilkinson looking as though she had been crying, and to Vernon exclaiming as they went by, 'I'll be done with you for ever.'

Both couples, on being cross-examined, fixed the evening as the last on which Miss Wilkinson had been seen alive, by references to affairs of their own. Following them came the last witness the police had to call—the booking-clerk at Oringford station, who spoke to Vernon having come there in an excited state late at night, asking if there was still any train from there, and taking a ticket for the only one that had still to call there—a late mail for London.

This was the evidence placed before the jury, and, without retiring, they in a few minutes returned a verdict of Wilful Murder against Sidney Vernon, and a few days after a reward of a hundred pounds was offered for his apprehension.

For some days after the inquest Dick Wilkinson was so ill as to be unable to leave home ; but as soon as he was sufficiently recovered to get out, he went to the office, and, asking to see Mr. Grainger, told him that he wished to be allowed to leave his employ without the customary month's notice, as he felt that he could not stay in that neighbourhood.

Grainger, in a tone of kindly sympathy, replied that he was not surprised that he should want to get away from a place where everything would tend to remind him of his loss ; that as to the notice, he could leave at any moment, and if he—Grainger—could in any way assist him to settle himself elsewhere, he would be happy to do so.

All he had made up his mind to at that time, Wilkinson answered, was to get away. He had a little money, and would look about him a bit before settling to anything fresh.

The same day he sold his household goods to a broker, and in the evening was packing up his clothes when he was surprised by a visit from Polly Mansell.

She looked flurried and embarrassed ; and as soon as she crossed the threshold hurriedly stammered out, ' I know I oughtn't to have come ; you'll think little of me for it, but—but I heard you were ill, and were going away, and—and I've come to say good-bye, Dick, and how sorry I am—you—you know what I mean.'

Her voice failed her, and she sank into a chair, her bright eyes filled with tears. Wilkinson was palpably affected by this display of feeling, and going up to her, and taking her hands in his, softly, but emphatically, said, ' You are a good girl, Polly ; so good that you make me feel ashamed of myself, of my own meanness.'

' I know what you mean,' she said, as he hesitated ; ' but I don't think that, and

I don't blame you, but I didn't come to speak about anything of that. I only thought how sad and lonely you must feel after what has happened, and I heard you were going, and I wouldn't have liked you to have thought I didn't care about your troubles, Dick ; I'm so sorry, for—for—'

' For, little as I deserve it, you love me still ; eh, Polly ?' he whispered, getting his arm round her neck.

She made no verbal answer, but her silence was of the character that gives consent, and he went on, ' God knows, Polly, it is not in vanity that I say I know you do ; your action—your noble action—in coming here to-night proves it ; and no man ever stood more in need of the comfort of a woman's loving-kindness than I do, for I do feel my trouble sorely. But there is something of good even in such a sorrow as has befallen me ; it has cleared my mind of a good deal of the frivolity and

snobbishness that was in it. I do love you, Polly, as fully, though not as bravely, as you love me. I did love you, even when I was afraid to say so in plain words, and played fast-and-loose, because—because—'

'Because I was only a servant girl,' she said, taking up the word as he hesitated. 'I saw it, Dick, and felt it; but I didn't blame you in my heart. When you used to come to Stonebury I didn't think you were so well up in the world as you are; and I know how people hereabout would have talked about you if they had thought you were going to marry a servant. But don't let us speak of that; I only came because you were in grief, and to say good-bye, and could I do anything for you?'

'You could, Polly,' he answered earnestly; 'you could promise me that you would still think kindly of me when I am

gone away; and that when I have got over the shock of these things, and settled elsewhere, you will come to me, and be my comforter—my wife.'

For the first time during the interview something like a smile flitted across her features, and she answered, 'Perhaps you'll think differently when you have got over the shock?'

'No, Polly,' he answered, seriously; 'it has sobered me; has made another, and I hope a better man of me—will you promise me? if you won't, I shall think that there is no one cares for me, now that poor Florry is gone.'

'You know I will, Dick, if you ask me,' she whispered, blushing and hanging her head.

He murmured a few not very coherent words of thanks, and then there was a silence which was broken by Polly in a hesitating way saying, 'You are not going

away on purpose to look for Mr. Sidney, are you?’

‘On purpose to look for him?’ he exclaimed in surprise.

‘To have him taken up, because the police haven’t found him,’ she explained; ‘I’ve read of people doing the like.’

‘In a penny romance, perhaps, Polly,’ he said, with a faint smile. ‘No, I’m not going on any wild-goose chase of that sort. Of course if I did find him I would have him arrested; he deserves no leniency at my hands, though even now I don’t think I hate him as I ought. I did like him, Polly; and if it had only been for my sake he might have dealt more mercifully with my sister; I couldn’t have thought it possible for him to have been such a scoundrel.’

‘And he wasn’t; he didn’t do it!’ exclaimed Polly, energetically, her face reddening as she spoke.

‘He didn’t do it!’ echoed Wilkin-

son, becoming excited, 'What do you mean?'

'I don't mean anything; only, I'll never believe it was him; he hadn't got it in him. There wasn't a kinder-hearted young gentleman breathing; he wouldn't have injured a fly, let alone murder an innocent girl.'

'Ah, so I supposed, too, Polly; but you see appearances are deceitful; whatever we may have thought of his character, there is the deed, and the evidence of his pre-meditating it.'

'Evidence or no evidence, I won't believe it,' she said emphatically.

'Well, then, Polly,' he answered wearily, 'there is no use in talking about it; I don't blame you for trying to think the best of a member of a family you have lived with for years, but I can't shut my eyes to facts. It was a cruel, dastardly, treacherous deed, and he will suffer for it. He may never be brought to justice, but I do believe that,

through the conscience, or in some way, such crimes are always punished, even in this world. So far as I am concerned I leave him in the hands of the great Judge of all. If it is any satisfaction to you or his people, you may be assured that I shall make no study of revenge; that would not bring back my dead sister; I am going away simply because everything here would remind me of her, and of the end she came to.'

'You are a good man, Dick—a good man!' she exclaimed, warmly. 'There are very few that would speak as forgivingly as you, and you'll not be without a blessing for it. I spoke out of my own head, and on my own account; but may I tell his mother and sister what you say, it will be some little comfort to them? They are in terrible grief, and, believe me, Dick, they do feel for you: they would have come to tell you so themselves, and to ask

you not to think too hardly of them ; but they were afraid you would have been angry with them.'

'They need not have been,' he said ; 'I'm not so unjust as that. I had no hard thoughts of them ; I pitied them as well as myself, for I knew that the blow that had fallen upon me had struck them too. But let us speak no more of that, Polly ; let us talk of ourselves, for, remember, I go away to-morrow.'

During the hour that she stayed after this, they did talk of themselves ; talked as lovers talk, and when the moment for separation came, they parted as lovers part.

On the following morning, Dick Wilkinson, after a brief visit to the little churchyard in which his sister was lying, made his way to the station, and took train to London ; the few intimate friends who saw him off, remarking, when he was

gone, that even in the short time that had elapsed since the discovery of his sister's death, grief had so altered him, that it was difficult to realise that he was the same person with the thoughtless, light-headed 'Lion' Wilkinson they had previously known.

In one respect the Vernons had greater cause than even Dick Wilkinson to dislike the place in which they were, and wish themselves away from it. For him there had been a general feeling of sympathy ; against them there arose among the more ignorant inhabitants of the district an unreasoning feeling of ill-will. The sins of the son and brother were visited upon the mother and daughter, who, on the first occasion they were seen in public after the discovery of the murder, were assailed with coarse cries expressive of the popular sentiment. To Blanche this seemed something horrible. It was only fear that lent

her strength to get home at the time, and from that day she would not venture outside the door of their home. The want of air and exercise, consequent upon this, added to her trouble of mind, told heavily upon her health, and she grew to look thin, and wan, and weary. Grainger saw this—saw it with sincere pain, and yet with a something of satisfaction also, for he regarded it as affording him an opportunity of pleading, with apparent disinterestedness, that his term of probation might be shortened. It was easy to see that her illness was of a kind for which rousing, and change of scene, rather than medicine, was required; and other things, of course, pointed strongly to the desirableness of a removal for the Vernons. On these grounds he felt that he could justify himself for speaking, and it was not long before he found an opportunity to speak.

One evening when he called, Blanche

and he were alone together. After a little commonplace conversation, they fell into silence, and Blanche leaned wearily back in her chair, with closed eyes. Presently she started, as if from sleep, and forcing a smile, said, 'I am afraid you must think me rude, but really it seems a toil to keep my eyes open.'

'I know how ill and weak you are,' he answered; 'nor is it surprising, seeing what you have gone through. I say nothing of my own feelings at seeing you suffer in this way; but for your own sake, and your mother's, you should go from here, where the memory of your grief is always kept fresh. You should travel; you want change of scene.'

'I do not feel equal to the exertion,' she said; 'and even if I did, there are other reasons that put the idea out of the question.'

'I think I know what you mean, Blanche,' he said; 'but those other reasons

need not exist. I cannot stand by in silence any longer ; I must speak, even at the risk of your thinking me selfish. In a few months we are to be man and wife, and then you would be travelling, and having change at any rate ; and why not be my wife at once, when a change in your life is so much needed ? Believe me, Blanche, it is for your sake that I ask you not to stand upon the mere letter of our engagement.'

'I do believe you, Mr. Grainger,' she answered, looking into his face, and speaking with evident feeling. 'I know that you have felt our sorrow as your own, and that it is the thought of our sorrow, of my sorrow, that has made you, too, look haggard and ill of late.'

'Well, as far as that goes,' he said, his face flushing as he spoke, 'I could do with rest and quiet too ; but that is neither here nor there, my anxiety is to give them to you ; am I to have that privilege ?'

‘You know my feelings,’ she answered, hesitatingly, ‘and this last sorrow has broken me a good deal ; I fear I should be a very dull and spiritless companion for life ; a burden upon a man, not a helpmate to him.’

‘I have no such fear, Blanche,’ he said tenderly, ‘and your speaking so despondently is only another proof of your requiring change. If your hesitation is on my account, you may safely dismiss it.’

‘You still wish me to be your wife, then ?’

‘I do, indeed,’ he answered earnestly ; ‘as I never wished for anything in my life before—will you ?’

There was a brief pause, during which a perplexed look on Blanche’s face grew into one of resolve, and rising from her seat and placing her hands in his, she answered firmly, ‘Yes, as you really wish it I will ; and I will try to be to you all that a wife should be.’

‘O Blanche, you have made me happy,’ he murmured, drawing her to him ; ‘and I’ll try to deserve it. You shall be happy too ; we’ll go away from all the troubles that weigh us down here, and seek rest, and peace, and happiness, in some quiet, pleasant spot where no one knows us ; and we can be all in all to each other.’

Up to this point he spoke in a strangely fervent manner, even for such an occasion ; so much so, in fact, that his tone, though still eager, seemed almost in the nature of an anti-climax ; as, after taking breath, he asked, ‘When shall it be, Blanche ?’

‘Well, I suppose I shall have to make some preparations in the way of dress,’ she answered ; ‘how much or little, mama will know better than me ; speak to her, she shall decide. You know,’ she concluded, with a faint smile, ‘she will not be for any unnecessary delay ;’ and on this understanding he left her, saying that he would call and see her mother next day.

BOOK IV.

BETWEEN CUP AND LIP.

CHAPTER I.

JIM HARRISON BEGINS TO SHOW HIS
HAND.

THE same night Blanche informed her mother of what had passed, and when Grainger called on the following morning, a single interview was sufficient to arrange details. The plan agreed upon was briefly that a London house-agent should be immediately instructed to secure a furnished house in some pleasant suburb of London for a short time; that Mrs. Vernon and Blanche should then go to town, purchase the wedding outfit, and make their other

preparations ; on the completion of which Grainger, bringing Barber with him to act as best man, would follow them to London, and the marriage take place by special license.

In the course of a week the house-agent wrote to say he had obtained a suitable residence in Blackheath Park, and the next day Mrs. Vernon and Blanche started for town. The train by which they were to travel was a first and second-class express that only stopped at Oringford when required, and only for passengers who were going through to London. This was a convenient arrangement for the iron-masters and other well-to-do business men in the district, but the workpeople did not use the train ; and that was why the Vernons selected it, for after their experience of popular feeling they were desirous of getting away unnoticed. Except the book-ing-clerk and a couple of porters there was

not a soul at the station when they got there some quarter of an hour before the train was due ; but two or three minutes later a fly drew up, and Jim Harrison got out. Blanche, leaving her mother sitting in the booking-office, had walked to one end of the platform, and did not hear the sound of this last arrival, and was consequently startled when, on turning round, she saw coming towards her the redoubtable Burn-my-heart-out, whom she knew by sight from his having been pointed out to her as the desperado who had so nearly murdered The Parson, and was sworn to murder the man to whom she was now about to be married. She hastily put down a veil she was wearing, and, after standing irresolute for a moment, walked on again with the intention of rejoining her mother, but as she came up to him he barred her way, and greeted her with,—
'Good morning, Miss.'

'Good morning,' she answered, faintly, and would have hurried by, but that Harrison blocked her path.

'I see you are afraid of me,' he went on, 'but you needn't be, I wouldn't hurt a woman; I wouldn't have alarmed you by speaking to you now, only I had a good reason for it.'

'A reason for speaking to me!' she exclaimed, raising her veil again, and looking up in his face with an air of surprise.

'Yes,' he answered, emphatically; 'a reason that concerns you even more than it does me,—I hear that you are going to be married to Grainger almost directly; is that true?'

Blanche knew that her mother had told some of their neighbours on the Mount of the intended marriage, and, bearing in mind how such things spread, she was not greatly surprised at his being able to put the question; but the mention of Grainger's name by him, and an evil light

that came into his eyes as he spoke of him, brought back her feeling of alarm with twofold force, and she stammered out confusedly, 'I do not see—How dare ——'

'Yes, yes, I understand,' he said, as her voice failed her. 'You don't see what that has to do with any one; and how dare I, the ruffian who swore to murder Mr. Grainger, speak to you, the young lady that is engaged to him? Well, I had no intention of speaking to you till I saw you here, and then it came into my head that it would be a good thing for *your* sake to do so. Anyway, Miss, you may believe that I don't speak just to insult or frighten you because you *are* engaged to Grainger. Whatever ill-will I may have against him, I would rather do you a service than an injury. I have done you a service before now, though you don't know it; and at this very time I am going to London to see after a piece of business that will be doing

you a still greater service ; and it is in connexion with that, I ask you, is it true that you are going to marry Grainger,—that you are on the way to prepare for the wedding now ?'

There was an impressiveness in his tone that so far carried conviction that her thought ran, 'Perhaps there is something in what he says ;' and it was with a feeling of anxiety as well as of curiosity that she asked, 'If it is true, what then ?'

'Why, then, I fancy that if you spoke what was in your heart, you'd say, And more's the pity for me that it is true. Yours isn't the face of a girl that is going to marry the man she likes, or that thinks to be happy in her marriage. Besides, I know a great deal more than you are aware of ; you aren't going to marry him because you care for him, but because he is dragging you into it. Rich as he is, you wouldn't think any one your enemy that stood be-

tween you and him, and I am going to try to stand between you. I believe I shall be able to do so even in spite of yourself, and I am certain I can if you will only help me a little.'

'I ought not to listen to such talk from you,' she said, her face reddening; 'but—but what do you mean?'

'I can't tell you all I mean now,' he answered, maintaining the impressive tone in which he had previously spoken; 'but I warn you, that if you marry him you will hardly have done so before you will come to know things that will make you wish you had been struck dead before you became his wife. I have watched his movements for purposes of my own, and know more about him than you would ever dream of. He is a damnable villain, and is practising such cold-blooded villany towards you as you are too good to think possible in any man. Your fate, if married to him,

would be something so horrible, that your best friends would think it a mercy for it to drive you mad. Apart from having ends of my own to serve, I would save any girl from such a fate, if it was only for the sake of my dead and gone wife, that he murdered.'

She noticed the kindly, pitying look that came into his eyes as he finished, and it gave her something of confidence in him.

'I will be candid with you,' she said. 'I have only heard of you as a violent, revengeful man; and I do think you blame Mr. Grainger overmuch in regard to your wife's death; but, at the same time, I have thought that there must be good in you to have loved your wife so well, and felt her loss so bitterly; and I am willing to believe that, whatever may be your feelings towards others, you do mean well to me. But—excuse me saying it—where Mr. Grainger's actions are concerned, I think

you are inclined to take exaggerated views. Mr. Grainger has been most generous to me, and I have every reason to believe desires my happiness. It would be ungrateful and unjust upon my part to think ill of him, on the mere word of an enemy. If there are things within your knowledge that would make it the terrible thing you say, tell me distinctly what they are, and let me judge.'

'No, I can't do that, Miss,' he said, shaking his head. 'I *do* mean well to you; but at the same time, as I told you, I have ends to serve; and telling you everything now would interfere with them, and be playing into his hands. But it's true what I say. It won't be long before you'll know that he has done that against you, and yours, and those you care for, as would make you, and those who cared for *you*, think that you had better a thousand times have been laid in your grave than married

to him. Of course you may think that I am only saying all this out of hate to Grainger; but I suppose you'll allow, if there is anything in it, you should look before you leap; and my truthfulness or untruthfulness in the matter can be so easily tested, that I think—as a matter of common sense—you'll say that it will be worth your while to put it to the proof, on the chance that there *may* be something in what I say. This is the last day of May; if you will promise me not to marry him before the last day of June, I'll promise you that you won't need to marry him at all. I'll fix him so that he'll be sorrier than me that I missed him at Gordon's Shaft. I expect a certain event will have happened by that time to prevent your marrying him; but if there is any delay in that event, I will then tell you what I know, and give you more than my word for it. Will you promise?'

At this moment her mother came on to the platform ; and Blanche, hastily answering, 'No, I could not enter into such a compact,' moved to join her.

'Just one half moment,' he said, as she was going. 'Will you give me the address you will be at in London?'

'No,' she answered ; 'I do not think it would be right for me to do so.'

'Ah, well!' he muttered, when she was out of hearing. 'I dare say Reeves will be able to find out that easily enough ; and though you won't promise, you'll *perform*. You don't think enough of him for what I have said not to tell its tale.'

Harrison was going to travel first-class, and on the arrival of the train he got a compartment of a carriage to himself. Since his return to the Hopewell district he had been the subject of a great deal of talk, not only in connexion with the adventure at Gordon's Shaft, but also from

his having acted as a well-to-do person. He had dressed well, spent freely, travelled about for—so far as lookers-on could judge—his own pleasure, and whenever the spirit moved him, and—though this last fact was only known to himself—had occasionally sent money to ‘Slogger’ Dawson, who had been working in the same shop with him in London, and still remained there. When the train was fairly on its way again, he took a letter from the last-named worthy out of his pocket, and settling himself in a corner commenced to read it. It was ill written, ill composed, and ill spelled, and ran as follows,—

‘DEAR JIM,—As you have had heaps of leter riting to do about the club bisness and the like, I dare say it aint no trouble to you, but it is to me as aint used to it, so ples scuse mistakes. I dont know when I wrote a letter before only just those two or three lines to say as how the

money you sent me had come all right; howmsoever, I have something perticular as I want to tell you, and so I must try my fist at it. Last Saterdag night I was knocking about by myself, and as I was going past the music-hall as you and me used to sometimes go to, it comes into my head, I may as well turn in here for an hour or so, and so in I goes. Some mates of mine that were there, and sitting close to the stage, beckoned me up and made room for me, and then of course I calls for my glass, and lites my pipe, and begins to watch the performance. There was some tumbling going on, and when that was over, the chairman comes on and reading from the bill, says, "Mr. Frank Middleton, the highly popular new gentleman comique, will next oblige." Well, down sits the chairman, and on comes the singer, and the minite I see him, says I to myself, "I'd take my bible oath I've seen his face

before somewheres or other." But where, that was the thing, I couldn't make out at any price. I thought, and thought, but I couldn't remember, till an hour later, when he came on for a second turn, then he sung a song as I had heard at the old place, and that brot it to my mind, and I brings my fist down on the table, and says loud enough for those near to hear, "Lion Wilkinson for a thousand." I didn't mean to have spoke, it was only by its coming on me sudden like, but I saw that it had made him notice me, and so I says to myself, "It's time for me to clear out, or I shall be getting collard for the job at Gordon's Shaft." When the song was over, and there was a bit of a move, I began to make the best of my way out; but the hall was full, and I was some time working through, and when I got outside there was Wilkinson, who had got out some other way. "Well, Dawson," he says to

me, "I suppose you saw that I knew you?" "Well, yes," I said, "I did." "And you thot," he says, beginning to walk on along with me, "as I would rase the cry of police." "Well," I says, "I thot as how you mite have thot as how it was your place to have me took over that bisness at Gordon's Shaft." "Perhaps it is my place," he says, "but I am not going to do it; my reson for speaking to you is to ask you if you should be writing to the old district, not to mention that you saw me in this position." Of course I said I wouldn't, and then we got talking about a lot of things, and at last I menshuned his sister, and said as I was sorry to hear of her coming to such an untimely end, and what a scoundrel that young Vernon must be.

"Well; yes," he said, "he must be as great a villen as ever lived if he did it;" and he said the *if* in so perticler a way that I looks at him and asks, "Is

there any doubt about his having done it?" "Well," he says, "I have discovered a little circumstance that leaves room to think that it is just possible that he may not be the guilty person." "But who else could it be?" I says. "Ah, that's another question," he says, "and one that I can't answer just now." Then he asks me if I had seen any one from the old quarter and heard them say anything about the murder. His asking that brot it into my mind that when you came to London again on a visit a few weeks after the murder, you did speak about it. If you remember, I said to you that one could hardly have thought such a easy-going looking customer as that young Vernon could have done such a thing, and you jumped up and said that it would be quite rite to think that he couldn't have done such a thing, and that he hadn't done it, and that the world would know it before long,

and know who had done it. We had been on the spree together, and you had a good few glasses in you at the time, so I thot no more of what you said then; but, as I tell you, what Wilkinson said brot it into my head again, and I told him, and it made him quite excited. "Did Harrison really say that?" he says, and I says you did. "And did he speak as if he knew anything?" he asks me. Well, I said you spoke as if you felt sure of what you said. "Was you likely to be visiting London again soon?" he asked then, and I said, Well you might be, I believed you knocked about a good deal. "Do you write to him?" he says, and I told him, Well I had and I could again; and he said he would be very much obliged to me if I would, and tell you this, and give you his address, and he wrote it on the slip of paper which I put in this letter. And now I have told you all,

and it as took me four whole evenings to do it, I can tell you; but I thot I had better give it you from beginning to end, for it is a rather curious start, isn't it? And, perhaps, you or Wilkinson, or both of you together, may be able to put two and two together over it. So no more at present from your old mate,

'SLOGGER DAWSON.'

'Well, if he really has discovered anything and can prove it,' muttered Harrison, returning the letter to his pocket, 'I dare say we *shall* be able to "put two and two together over it;" any way it's worth while seeing what he does know or think, and I can act according.'

Grainger, who was in town, met the train on its arrival in London; and while assisting Blanche and her mother out of their carriage he saw Harrison get out of the next one. The sight startled him un-

pleasantly, and it instantly occurred to him that he had come by the same train as the Vernons with a view to hanging upon their track for some evil purpose. Second thoughts, however, were more reassuring. 'But no,' he said to himself as he saw him take his portmanteau and get into a cab, 'd---n him, I'll do him the justice of believing that he wouldn't injure a woman even to strike at me; I suppose it is only a coincident; he has taken to spreeing about lately.' And with this reflection he took the ladies on their way, and Harrison went on his, towards Dick Wilkinson's lodgings, which consisted of a sitting-room and bed-room over a newspaper shop in the East India Road.

After receiving Dawson's letter, Harrison had written to Wilkinson, telling him that he would be in London on that day, and would call upon him immediately upon his arrival, so that Dick was prepared

for his visit. He had got a dinner ready, and it was not till Harrison had lit his pipe at the conclusion of the meal that the other began to lead up to the subject that was uppermost in both their minds, by observing, 'Dawson told me he had written to you about meeting me; I suppose you were rather surprised to hear what I was doing for a living?'

'Not particularly,' answered Harrison. 'I've noticed that people who are really any good at things they get amateuring at, very often end by taking to them altogether.'

'But I meant at my taking to it so soon after my poor sister's death?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, it did just cross my mind that what had happened might have steadied you so that you wouldn't have been in a humour for going into that sort of life.'

'I wasn't in a humour for going into it, Jim,' exclaimed Wilkinson, earnestly, 'and

that is why I make a point of mentioning it; I wouldn't like to leave any one under the impression that I thought so lightly of my sister's memory. My being in the position I am in just now is a case of needs must. The people I am lodging with are old friends of our family; the man is leader of the orchestra at the hall Dawson saw me in, and knowing I could sing a bit, got me an engagement there when other things failed me—for other things did fail me. I found that clerking was very hard to obtain in London under any circumstances, and not to be got at all without "a character from last place;" and directly after I came here I discovered something that made me feel that I couldn't ask for a character from my last place.'

'Had you done any thing to give them a reason for not giving you a character?' asked Harrison, bluntly.

'No; nothing of that kind; I need

only have written for it to have got as good a character as could be given ; but I had a very strong reason for not putting myself under anything like an obligation in that quarter.'

'You would only have had to have asked Grainger,' said Harrison, with as great an appearance of unconcern as he could manage to put on.

'Oh, speaking of Grainger,' said Wilkinson, making no direct reply to the other's observation, 'I saw in the papers that he spoke for you when you were arrested ; I suppose you and he are friends again, now ?'

'A good many suppose that,' answered Harrison, 'but they're wrong.'

'But I thought——'

'Look here !' exclaimed Harrison, giving way to his temper, which since the mention of Grainger he had only managed to keep under control by a strong effort ; 'you can suppose I'm friends with him

when you can suppose that he can give me back my wife. I as much mean to pay him off as ever I did, and only I feel sure of doing it in a way less risky to myself, I would have put a knife into him, or something else of that sort, before now. But, however, never mind that.'

'I didn't wish to recall painful feelings, Jim,' said Wilkinson, in a half-apologetical tone, 'but I couldn't well say what I want to say until I knew how you stood on the point. You would make out from Dawson's letter that I wanted to speak to you because you had said you did not believe that it was Sidney Vernon who murdered my sister.'

Harrison nodded, and the other asked, 'Did you say so?'

'Yes; and I say so again,' answered Harrison, promptly.

'But is that only an idea of yours, or have you grounds for the belief?'

'I have grounds for the belief—very strong grounds.'

'What are they?'

'Well, unless any thing you may know or think points the same way, it wouldn't suit me to say what they are.'

'Well,' said Wilkinson, after a little hesitation, 'there can be no harm in telling you what I have discovered, and leaving you to judge for yourself how it points. As I told you, the people I am lodging with were friends of ours, and a few months before her death, Florence—my sister—went on a visit to them—as I thought. But the day after I came here, the daughter of the house, who is about the same age as Florence, and had kept up a correspondence with her, came to me, and saying that she had something on her mind told me that when I supposed Florence to be visiting here, she was nowhere near London. She had written to

this girl, telling her that she wished to go into the country in connexion with a matter that she didn't want me to know about until after it was over. To enable her to do this she was going to tell me that she was going to London on the invitation of our friends here, and what she asked of this girl was to receive letters from her under cover, and re-post them, so that they should reach me with the London post-mark, and take in and forward my answers. The girl got it into her head that there was some grand romantic scheme in hand, and she consented, and the thing was done.'

'I'm not quite sure that I see yet how that bears,' said Harrison, as the other came to a pause.

'Well, I was better able to think then than I was just after her death,' resumed Wilkinson; 'and after the first feeling of surprise was over, I saw that the time at which she was away had a bearing upon—'

upon what the doctor stated ; you understand me ?'

'Yes, I know what you mean,' said Harrison, in a tone of sympathy.

'And after a while I recollected,' Wilkinson went on, 'that Sidney Vernon had not been away at that time, and that—that somebody else was——'

'And that somebody was Gaffer Grainger, eh ?' exclaimed Harrison emphatically, as the other stammered and came to a stop.

'Well, yes,' said Wilkinson, after another moment's hesitation. 'So much is bare fact, and since the name has been mentioned I will go a little further and speak of my own ideas in connexion with the facts. In the first place, dates convince me that Sidney could not have had the motive that was generally supposed for destroying her ; and in the second place, unless he was as great a hypocrite as it is

possible to imagine a man to be, he would have been only too glad to have married her. On the other hand, though Florence denied it, or rather would not admit it, I now feel almost sure—I have been thinking the matter over very thoroughly—that Grainger's attentions to her were more than merely friendly ; and if they were, and it was with him she went wrong, we know what reasons he would have for wishing her out of the way. If I was certain that Florence and he were together at the time I thought she was in London, I would say that if she didn't commit suicide Grainger either murdered her or caused her to be murdered.'

'Didn't the girl here tell you from what place your sister sent the letters to be re-posted ?' asked Harrison, with an impassiveness that grated upon the other who had become agitated.

'No, she can't remember it,' he

answered. 'She says she would know the name if she heard it, and I have mentioned nearly every place I could think of, but without success.'

'Is she in the house?'

'Yes, she is down in the shop.'

'Just go and ask her then whether it was Llandudno.'

Wilkinson left the room for a minute, and on his return excitedly exclaimed, 'Yes, that's the place; how did you know of it?'

'Well, I have a reason for not telling you that much just yet,' answered the other, after a little consideration. 'All that I can say now is that your idea does jump with mine.'

Wilkinson urged him to be more explicit, but with little effect.

'What *I* know,' Harrison said, 'must be the last link of a chain that I'm putting together on my own plan, and for my own

purpose ; and the time for clinching the chain hasn't come yet ; but it's at hand though, and in a fortnight, or three weeks at the outside, I expect I shall be able to tell you even more than I know myself at present. By that time I will have seen another party who will know something about the matter.'

After their arrival in London, Mr. Grainger was all attention to the Vernons. He escorted them on their shopping expeditions, dined with them each evening, only left them late at night, and was with them again betimes in the morning. But his devotion scarcely met with so full a return as he had anticipated. As with the exception of a few purchases, their arrangements had been completed before starting for town, Mrs. Vernon had said that the marriage might comfortably be celebrated about a week later ; and though the point had not been distinctly settled there had

been a sort of tacit understanding between Grainger and her that it was to take place within that time. There was no good reason why it should not; but Blanche, without assigning any reason, by merely dallying in small affairs, had so delayed matters that a fortnight had gone by, and the actual day for the marriage was not yet decided upon. What Harrison had said to her at the Oringford Station had 'told its tale.' Though she struggled against admitting it even to herself, it was his language on that morning that influenced her conduct. 'Perhaps,' she thought, 'there was something in what he said. If his manner when he spoke was wild, it was also emphatic and assured.'

She needed no minute self-examination to convince her that even now the marriage was a sacrifice so far as she was concerned, and she was willing to be saved—even by the fierce 'Burn-my-heart-out.'

At times it would occur to her that such thoughts were sinful ; that, despite his mysterious hints, Harrison's real meaning was simply a threat against Grainger's life, and that she was scarcely less wicked than he to palter, as she was doing, through anything he had said. Still she did palter until, standing at the French windows on the villa, on the night of the day that completed the fortnight of their stay in London, she caught sight of Jim Harrison cautiously peering over the hedge enclosing the garden. Their eyes met, and seeing himself detected he hastily retired, and watching him she saw that he joined another man whose figure she could just make out in the shadow of a neighbouring tree.

Grainger was in the room with her at this time, and as she turned round to him her blood ran cold at the thought that Harrison was dogging him to murder him.

She remembered that it was through her that he was still here, and felt as though she were an accessory to whatever violence was being plotted against him.

Within the hour she had definitely arranged to become his wife on the third day following, and when they were saying their good-nights at the door she, after a little hesitation, said to him, 'There is a thing I feel I ought to mention to you; when I was looking out of the window on the other side of the house, I saw the face of that dreadful man!'

'What man?' he asked, looking at her in surprise.

'The one who has threatened your life, who headed the attack upon Mr. Grahame.'

'Oh, Burn-my-heart-out,' he said, without any particular appearance of alarm. 'Well, I dare say it would be him you saw, for I know he is about London; you

didn't notice it, but he came up in the same train as you.'

'I spoke of it,' said Blanche, hurriedly, 'in order that you might tell your coachman to be on his guard.'

'I shall tell him to drive over the scoundrel if he gets a chance,' he answered.

'Pray avoid——' Blanche was beginning, when, in an instant, her eyes became fixed, her face turned deadly white, and she staggered backward, and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms. At the same moment he heard the entrance-gate open and footsteps advancing up the path, and, turning his head as he still supported Blanche, he saw, in the clear summer moonlight, not, as he had fully expected, Jim Harrison,—but Lionel Harding.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE REAPPEARANCE.

ASTOUNDING as Lionel Harding's reappearance seemed to Blanche Vernon, it was in itself a very simple matter. He had not been aboard of 'The Hybrid' when she went down. When she had gone out of Canton, she was to have called back in a week, and Harding and the ship's carpenter had remained on shore to superintend the making, by native artisans, of some additional fittings, which the experience of the run out had shown to be desirable. In connexion with this business they had gone inland, and had not

heard of the loss of the ship until a time when they knew that the news of it was on the road to England. Harding had then written to Blanche, telling her of his safety, and that he would come home in the 'Speedwell,' a sailing ship, which would reach England about the middle of June. It was this letter that Reeves had intercepted and tampered with, before handing it over to Grainger. The alteration of June to July in the letter had well served its purpose of misleading Grainger. Though he had been annoyed at the manner in which Blanche had procrastinated over the petty details of the arrangements, he had no serious misgivings that the event would be put off long enough to admit of Harding's return. He considered that he had two or three weeks to spare and was convinced that it only required insistence upon his part to put an end to the delay upon hers. Up to the night

treated of at the conclusion of the last chapter, he had given way to her wavering mood with an air of gallant submission; but on that night he had begun to initiate his policy of insistence, and she had yielded to—as he imagined—the first indications of his intention to be firm. When she had named so near a day, he had looked upon all as won, and had felt exceedingly happy and triumphant; so much so, that the information that Jim Harrison was lurking about scarcely caused him a passing moment's uneasiness. His jubilant feeling was in no small degree due to the idea that he had not only won the maid he loved, but had, by the same stroke, defeated the man he hated. Revenge as well as love was sweet to him. He could imagine and gloat over what Harding's feelings must be when he came home and found Blanche married to him; and, with such thoughts in his mind, his

sensations on beholding Harding may be easily comprehended.

When Reeves wrote to Jim Harrison in connexion with the intercepted letter, his intention had been to ask him—when he had assured himself of being able to send a second letter safely—as he was in London, to look out for the arrival of ‘The Speedwell,’ meet her, and communicate with Harding, so as to put him on his guard against any trickery of Grainger’s to keep him from the Vernons. Harrison, as we have seen, had in a reckless fit returned to Oringford without answering the letter. Chance, however, had turned this apparently mad action to his advantage, and he returned to London in a better position to keep watch for the arrival of ‘The Speedwell’ than he would have been in had he been living there as a workman. Each day, after his interview with Dick Wilkinson, he inquired concerning her at the

office of her owners ; and when at length she came in he was at the dock to meet her. Mingling with the clamouring crowd of boarding-house keepers, and other water-side harpies who surrounded the crew as they came ashore, he saw Harding land from her, and heard him give a cabman the name of the hotel to which he was to drive him. Jumping into another cab he ordered himself to be driven to the same hotel, and reached it just in time to see Harding go in. Dismissing the cab he sauntered about in front of the hotel for a short time, and then muttered, ' Ah, well, I've housed him ; a few more minutes to let him get fixed, and then to put him upon Grainger. I know when I tell him he would be ready enough to join me in another Gordon's Shaft business if anything of the kind was required. Though, as far as that goes, I don't suppose he'll be as mad against Grainger as Grainger

will against him when they meet; Gaffer would as soon see the devil as him at this time. I wonder how he'll take it?

The question seemed to suggest some new and startling idea. He came to an abrupt pause in his musings, and after standing still for a minute, with a thoughtful look on his face, struck his hand on his thigh, and muttered, 'By Jingo! that never struck me before. That's what he'll do; but let him; it will be all the better for me, and can't really hurt the others. It will be the very last card he can play; and when he has shown himself scoundrel enough to play it, I'll play my last one—and such an one! How glad I have been since that I missed him at the Shaft: that wouldn't have been half revenge like this. There seems a providence in the way I have got hold of him; it looks as if it was intended that I was to revenge the death of my wife. As her father would have

said, The Lord has delivered him into my hands; and if he gets out of them, he'll deserve to—that's all. And now I'll go and see this young fellow, but I won't tell him everything yet.'

He entered the hotel, asked to be shown to Harding's apartment, and marched in upon him in much the same abrupt fashion that he had done upon the occasion of their first meeting.

'Well, young gentleman, here you are then!' was his greeting; 'I'm glad to see you home again.'

'What! you here again!' exclaimed Harding in surprise.

'Yes,' said the other, with a grim smile; 'you don't seem over-glad to see me, and yet you ought to be: I'm the proper person to be the first to welcome you; I'm your what-do-you-call—your—your good genius. If it hadn't been for my good geniusing—for you will find that it has been good to

you, whatever it may turn out for others—you would have had occasion to have wished that you never had come home,—that you really had gone down in ‘The Hybrid.’

‘Well, I guess from your being here that more devilry has been going on,’ said Harding curtly, though not uncivilly.

‘There has,’ answered Harrison,—‘devilry that the other wasn’t a patch upon; but——’

‘What is it?’ interrupted Harding, impatiently.

‘That’s a long story,’ answered Harrison, in an imperturbable tone; ‘but I was going to say, that so far as it concerns you it hasn’t gone past remedy.’

‘I suppose that scoundrel Grainger has been trying to entrap Miss Vernon again,’ said Harding, an angry flush rising to his face as he spoke.

‘He has, and to some purpose,’ answered Harrison: ‘he is in London with her, for

them to be married. She thinks you are at the bottom of the sea. He stopped your letter, telling her of your escape.'

'The villain!' exclaimed Harding, passionately. 'In London here! Tell me where. He marry her! I'll kill him rather!'

'Oh, you can leave the killing to me,' said Harrison, with a short, jarring laugh.

'Tell me where in London I can find them,' repeated Harding, impetuously.

'Well, I will to-night; I'll take you to where you can come upon them. I'll call for you here in the evening. In the meantime you can have a look through these: you'll find some strange news in them.'

As he spoke he took a tightly rolled packet of newspapers from his pocket, and, throwing them on the table, left the room before Harding, who was unprepared for so very abrupt a departure, could interpose a word to stay him.

The papers were copies of the *Oringford Chronicle*, containing lengthy and detailed reports of the attack upon The Parson at Gordon's Shaft, the arrest of Harrison on his returning to the neighbourhood, and Grainger's coming forward to speak on his behalf; and last, though not least, of the inquest upon Florence Wilkinson. The circumstances in connexion with the latter matter grieved him greatly. He knew how keenly Blanche would feel the shame that had fallen upon her brother, and, through him, upon their name; and he sat pondering upon this and other matters until Harrison, true to his promise, came again.

The papers were still lying about when he entered the room, and, seeing them, he observed,—

‘I expect what's in them gave you plenty to think about while I was away?’

'Yes, yes!' said Harding; 'but are we going now?'

'Well, there isn't exactly any hurry for a few minutes; but, as you are so anxious to be off, we can get on the move.'

'What part are we bound for?' asked Harding, when they were outside.

'Blackheath,' answered Harrison; 'and as we will have to wait about a while there, let us leave talking till we get there; it will be easier and safer than in the streets or trains.'

'All right,' said Harding, briefly, and no more was said till they were fairly on the Heath making their way towards the villa occupied by the Vernons, when Harrison opened a conversation by observing, 'I suppose you were surprised by what was in those newspapers I left you?'

'Yes, I was surprised; but I was still more puzzled,' said Harding, in a tone that invited question.

‘And what puzzled you?’ asked Harrison.

‘Well, chiefly Grainger’s coming forward to speak upon your behalf when you were before the magistrates for the outrage upon Mr. Grahame.’

‘But Mr. Grahame himself spoke for me,’ said Harrison, ironically.

‘Ay, that I can understand ; but Grainger is an altogether different personage. He is an infernal scoundrel ; still I don’t think he would have acted in that manner from fear ; I am pretty well sure he wouldn’t from love, or in a forgiving spirit ; and what possible interest he could have in doing it I’m altogether at a loss to make out.’

‘Well, I see you reckon him up at about a correct figure ; many people believe that it was in a forgiving spirit that he did it ; but it wasn’t ; he *had* an interest.’

‘Yes ; but what was it ?’

'Well, I can't tell you just now, but you will know before long; and you'll say it was a strong enough one. But what do you think about young Vernon?'

'Well, I suppose we are bound to believe anything of anybody upon sufficient evidence,' answered Harding, rather hesitatingly; 'and the evidence against him seems full and clear enough; and yet I cannot bring myself to believe that he murdered the girl.'

'Have you heard anything of him or from him, while you have been away?'

'Not a word.'

'Oh, I just thought that some one might have been writing to you before the loss of "The Hybrid" was known.'

'No; I received no letter while I was out?'

'Then, you only have your doubts about Vernon being guilty, because you think he is not the kind of fellow to do such a thing.'

‘Well, my idea of him was certainly that of a man incapable of so foul a deed; beside, thinking the affair over, I can’t see that the supposed motive was anything like strong enough to account for the act. I know from his own lips that at the time of my visit to the Black Country he was all anxiety to marry her; and it was owing to her fighting shy of it that they were not married; and it does seem strange that a girl should allow herself to be seduced where she had refused to marry. But waving that, taking it that he was her seducer, I still can’t see that it was in his case a motive powerful enough to account for a man altogether belying his nature, and risking his neck.’

‘But if he didn’t do it, who did?’

‘Well, that is a question I asked myself while waiting for you to call for me,’ answered Harding; and again he spoke in a somewhat hesitating fashion. ‘As I am

doubly prejudiced in the matter, I may see things very crookedly ; but I'll tell you what I did think when I was trying to hit upon possible answers to my own questions. When I was last at home, I was given to understand that there had been some love-making between this Miss Wilkinson and Grainger ; and if there was the slightest suspicious circumstance pointing to him in connexion with her death, I would a thousand times sooner believe that he, rather than Sidney Vernon, was her murderer.'

'Well,' said Harrison, 'I know there is more than one who knows all the parties concerned, who is quietly of opinion that if young Vernon didn't do it, Grainger did.'

'But I suppose that, like myself, they have only their opinion?'

'I suppose so ; but still I think that even a few having that opinion now, shows that if it turned out that some one had more than an opinion could bring evidence,

you know people wouldn't pooh-pooh it, and say that he couldn't have done it ; and that it must be spite to accuse him ; and so on.'

He spoke in an eager, questioning tone, and Harding answered, ' Well, no, I don't think his general character would be of any service to him in such a case.'

' Nor his riches either ?'

' No, nor his riches either, if there was real proof against him. An innocent man may lose his life for want of money, if the police consider it necessary to hang him in order to justify themselves for having arrested him ; but money won't save a guilty one. But why——'

' Here we are at the place,' interrupted Harrison, pointing to a house.

In an instant the current of Harding's thoughts was diverted. ' As Blanche thinks that I am dead, I ought, perhaps, to send a message first,' he said ; ' but, after all,' he went on, with a slight smile, ' I hope there

will be joy enough at seeing me to counter-balance any ill effects that might arise from the surprise ; I don't think she will blame me for risking it.'

He quickened his pace as he spoke, and was making straight for the gateway of the house when Harrison pulled him up. 'Hold hard, sir,' he exclaimed, laying his hand upon his shoulder ; 'you mustn't rush in like that ; I've managed the business so far, let me go through with it to the end in my own way ; it won't make an hour's difference to you.'

'But why wait an hour ?' said Harding, impatiently.

'Well, look here,' said Harrison, 'I have watched round the house several nights, and I know exactly how things run. He is in there with her now ; when he is going she will come to the door with him, and then you can drop upon the beast in her presence ; that's what I want. You

couldn't force yourself right into the room where they are, you would have to ask for her, and see her by herself first, and then it would be made lighter to him. The old woman—excuse me, I didn't mean to be rude—would take care of that.'

Harding demurred, thinking the reason for delay a foolish one; but the other, in his unreasoning hate, insisted, and urging as a title for consideration for his wishes, his having served Harding so far, the latter yielded, and further agreed that for a day or two he would again be silent as to the agency that had led to his appearing so opportunely. This being arranged, they had loitered about until Grainger was taking his leave for the night, when Harding had come upon him and Blanche in the manner we have seen.

The angry oath that involuntarily rose to Grainger's lips as he recognised Harding brought Mrs. Vernon hurrying to the door.

At the sight of Harding she too almost fainted, but her perception of her daughter's condition enabled her to rally herself, and taking Blanche out of Grainger's arms, she supported her into the house, and the two men were left glaring at each other with looks that told plainly enough of the feelings of hate and antagonism in their hearts.

Grainger was the first to speak. 'So you have got back, have you?' he ground out between his teeth as he heaved a long breath.

'Yes; I've come back as you see; of course *you* are very much surprised,' said Harding, and, despite his promise to Harrison, he sneered in a manner that was significant as well as triumphant.

'If I am it isn't agreeably; you know that fast enough,' the other answered. 'I dare say you are thinking what a lucky devil you are, and so you are to a certain

extent. If your coming is to be of any service to you, it is just in time ; a week later, and I would have liked to have seen you here : I would have been married to her then. But, mark this, I hope, and shall expect, to marry her yet ; I don't see why your turning up in this penny-theatre style should break off an engagement at the eleventh hour ; but anyway you may make up your mind to this, if I don't marry her you shan't. I have one pull left yet, and I'll use it to that extent, whatever anyone may say or think.'

'You are a mean, cowardly blackguard !' exclaimed Harding, indignantly.

'That is as may be,' said the other, coolly, 'but ——'

'I want to hold no further discourse with you,' Harding interrupted.

'But I do with you, and you had better listen ; I'm not speaking like an old woman, just to scold ——'

'Say what you have to say, briefly,' exclaimed Harding, again cutting him short.

'Well, briefly then, I say that if you are the tremendously generous fellow that you would have people believe you to be, you won't—even if you have the chance—get drawing Miss Vernon into any fresh arrangements to-night. When you were at Vernon's place in Stonebury, you were holding forth about the meanness of being a dog in the manger, and that is all you can be in this affair now. I can prevent her from marrying you, and I will; while, if you try to hinder her from marrying me, you will do both her and her mother an injury; they are without means. I don't set up for being one of the extra-generous sort, I'm quite open to confess that with me self is the first law of nature; I won't stand to be thrust aside and made a laughing-stock of to make room for you. As I said just now I have a pull left yet, and you

may take my word for it that it is a sure one—one that she wouldn't try to resist, and that you—being so generous, you know—would be bound to advise her to give in to. I'll use it if there is occasion, so be warned ; if you make any move against me to-night, you will only be doing harm to her without doing good to yourself. I shall come here in the morning to hear what the ladies have to say, and tell them my views, and if you really wish them well you'll be at truce with me till then.'

'Well, if you have any pull as you call it, I know you'll be scoundrel enough to use it ; and, as I do wish well to the ladies, I will not take any decisive step till I know what this "pull" is, and then I'll act accordingly.'

'Ah, well, that is all I want,' said the other, in a tone of sneering triumph ; 'you are bold, and clever, and lucky, but you'll find you've caught a tartar in me, I have

my slices of luck too, and you'll find that I'm not to be bowled out.'

He paused as if expecting some answer, but Harding made none.

This seemed to enrage him, for the angry blood instantly rushed to his face, crimsoning it to the roots of his hair, and in a voice that, though low, was full of intense passion, he exclaimed, 'See here, I never saw the man yet that could cut me out in anything, and you arn't going to. I told you I would have her, and I *will*. I'll cross you, if I have to rack her heart to do it. If you don't want to make her suffer, go at once. Do you hear, will you go and leave things to take their course?'

'No!' answered Harding, emphatically. 'I'll know the worst you can do.'

'Very well,' answered Grainger, 'you'll be responsible for what I shall do;' and, brushing past the other, he walked away.

Harding stood still for about a mi-

nute's space, as if to collect his thoughts; and then, the outer door being still open, stepped into the house.

Just at that moment Polly Mansell came out of a room opening into the hall. She had heard from Mrs. Vernon the cause of Blanche's swooning, and was therefore not so surprised as the others had been, at the sight of Harding.

'Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Harding, for her sake,' she whispered, going up to him. 'It would have been a living death for her to have been married to him; her heart wasn't in it a bit, though she did believe you was dead. He forced himself on her, just because he had helped them a bit; and that is what he helped them for. I can see through him, if they can't. Kindness, indeed! don't tell me about kindness, when any one might see that Miss Blanche's heart is being broke.'

'You are a good, affectionate girl,' he

said, giving her hand a hearty shake; 'but tell me, has she recovered from this shock?'

'Yes, we've brought her round,' she answered. 'She is in there with her mother. If you want to see her, you had better go in. You mightn't be asked,' she concluded, with a slight smile; 'I hardly think Mrs. Vernon is as glad to see you as Miss Blanche is.'

'I'll act upon your advice, if you will lead the way for me,' he whispered back, smiling in his turn.

'Oh, of course I'll do that, sir,' she said, in a demure tone, though there was a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. And, stepping to the door through which she had just come, and throwing it open, announced — 'Mr. Harding!' as though she were ushering in some ordinary, every-day caller.

As he entered the room, Blanche was

seated with her elbows resting on a table and her head supported between her hands ; but, at the sound of his footstep she raised her eyes, and gazed at him with so much of bewilderment in her looks, that, after waiting for some time, expecting her to speak, he softly said,—

‘ You may be sure I am in the flesh, Blanche ; the sea does not give up its dead in this fashion. I know that till within the last few minutes you have been under the impression that I perished with my shipmates ; but I was not on board of “ The Hybrid ” when she went down.’

‘ Why did you not let me know this before ?’ said Blanche, at length finding her voice ; ‘ you might have known how happy the knowledge would have made me ; and it would have saved me from so much—oh, so very much of wretchedness !—from being the promised, almost the actual wife of another, while my love—now that I

know that you are living—is still yours. O Lionel! Lionel! such neglect was cruel. I know not what I shall do. I almost wish I was dead.'

She had spoken hysterically; and, as she concluded, she again hid her face in her hands, and sobbed so that her whole frame trembled. The sight of this grief was too much for Harding; and, heedless of the presence of her mother, and all other considerations, he darted to her side, and throwing his arms around her passionately exclaimed,—

'Don't grieve like that, darling. All may be well yet—and soon. You have been cruelly dealt with, but not by me. Till I landed in England to-day I was under the impression that you knew of my safety. I wrote to inform you of it within a week of the wreck—within an hour of my knowing of the event, and that news would go home that all belonging to the

ship had been lost with her. But my letter never reached you.'

Raising her face again, Blanche thanked him with a glance; but, before she could speak, her mother, who sat looking on fumingly indignant, took up the discourse by observing,—

'Well, it does appear strange, Mr. Harding, that of all letters addressed to us yours alone, and in every instance, should fail to reach us.'

'Yes, it is strange—to say the least of it,' he said, unwinding his arms from Blanche; 'and I have a very strong idea that it is something more than merely strange.'

'That I can say nothing about,' she said, coldly; 'but, in any case, it is unfortunate. However, you cannot hold Blanche responsible for the consequences. She acted in good faith.'

'But, Ma!' said Blanche, in a tone of

surprise, 'this cannot go on now. I cannot think Mr. Grainger himself would wish it.'

'If Mr. Harding, here, had been a few days later in coming forward in this unexpected manner,' said Mrs. Vernon, 'it would have been useless for you to have talked in that strain, Blanche; and I must confess that I don't see why the accident of his coming a day or two sooner rather than later should be made to affect Mr. Grainger prejudicially. As to what Mr. Grainger might wish, I think you had better wait and learn that from himself. One thing, however, is certain — he will not wish to be made ridiculous in the eyes of the world.'

'I had a little talk with Mr. Grainger outside,' said Harding, 'and I may tell you that his wish is that the engagement between Blanche and him should be carried out. He will be here to-morrow to tell

you that such is the case, and I have only to ask that in deciding Blanche will consider herself and not me; but I do hope that she *will* consider herself.'

'I cannot think that I would be considering either his happiness or my own if I consented,' said Blanche, firmly. 'I shall——'

'Say nothing rashly, Blanche,' said Harding, checking her; 'take to-night for thought, and decide only when you have heard what he has to say, and let no thought of me induce you to act in a manner that may prove injurious to yourself.'

While he was speaking the cloud that had fallen upon Mrs. Vernon's face cleared away a little, and, speaking in a more gracious tone, she observed, 'I must do you the justice of saying, Mr. Harding, that you are acting most honourably and disinterestedly, and I hope Blanche will

act with equal good sense. This complication has arisen through the miscarriage of your letter ; that such miscarriage has proved a great misfortune to you I freely admit, but as you speak so reasonably I feel sure that you on the other hand will admit that the misfortune is yours.'

'I am willing to accept it as solely mine, and I would only be too glad if by doing so I could secure Blanche's happiness. I see now that there is confusion worse than death, and as she has brought herself into this position by acting on the belief that I was dead, it would, perhaps, have been better for her if I had gone down with my ship.'

'Don't be unkind, Lionel ; don't speak like that,' Blanche faltered, looking at him with tears standing in her eyes.

He was still by her side, and seizing her hand he exclaimed in a low, passionate tone, 'I know *you* wouldn't wish me

dead, Blanche, but I feel that I could die to make you happy! But, however,' he went on, trying to speak in a half-playful tone, 'I only said "perhaps," Blanche, it may turn out that it is better for you that I did not sink with "The Hybrid;" at any rate, I will only say good night now. I will call in the early part of to-morrow evening, and then I will say farewell, if necessary.'

He pressed her hand and seemed as if about to stoop and kiss her, but after a moment's hesitation he turned his head away, and bidding her mother good night hurried from the house.

Though Harding's reappearance at this juncture had placed her in a position that to one of her nature was cruelly embarrassing, Blanche's feeling was upon the whole one of joy. Her mother's, upon the other hand, was one of extreme annoyance. Mrs. Vernon, as we have seen, held what

those entertaining them choose to style 'sensible' views of marriage. The theory of these views being broadly 'the richer the man the better the husband,' she, of course, regarded Grainger as an infinitely better 'match' than Harding. She had been desirous to see Blanche become his wife even in the days of their supposed prosperity, and now when in the time of their need for the substantial advantages of a good match the prize was all but secured, the prospect of its being lost—thrown away—through some 'romantic folly' on Blanche's part was bitterly distasteful to her—so distasteful that, despite what had fallen from her daughter, she determined still to fight against it.

Breaking a silence that had lasted for some minutes after Harding's departure, she observed, 'Of course, Blanche, you cannot wonder that Mr. Grainger should expect you to carry out your engagement

with him now that it has gone so very far ?’

‘I will wonder if he expects me to do so when I tell him, as I must, that that now I know that Lionel is living, I could not in honesty marry any other man——’

‘Oh, that is mere school-miss talk, Blanche!’ exclaimed the mother, impatiently; ‘if girls generally were to get it into their minds that they would not marry one man because they happened to have a liking for another, very few would get married at all. Mr. Grainger will probably look upon such an idea as nonsense, and insist upon the engagement being carried out; and if he does I must say that I think—putting aside his special claim to consideration for all his kindness to us—you are bound to accede to his wishes.’

‘I should not consider myself so bound,’

said Blanche, speaking with a suddenly kindled indignation that brought back firmness to her voice and colour to her face, 'and his insisting upon such a thing would enable me to tell him so distinctly. I know how kind he has been to us, but I would begin to suspect the motive of his kindness, so far as I was concerned, if he were still to insist upon me marrying him, after I had told him my heart was another's.'

'If you are going into heroics, of course I can't follow you,' said the mother, shrugging her shoulders; 'I am only speaking as any sensible person would speak; why, even Mr. Harding told you to think of yourself.'

'In the case we are speaking of I would think of myself,' answered Blanche, emphatically; 'it would be time to do so if I found myself dealing with a man who showed that he had neither proper respect for himself nor consideration for me.'

‘Then, if Mr. Grainger should insist——’

‘I will try to think better of him than to suppose he will,’ interrupted Blanche, in a tone suggestive of her wishing to bring the conversation to an end.

‘But if he does?’ persisted the mother.

‘I shall decline,’ answered Blanche, in a very decided tone.

‘Ah, well,’ said her mother, ‘I must say with Mr. Harding, take the night for thought; perhaps you will think better of it in the morning.’

‘I shall not think differently,’ said Blanche, in the same decided—almost defiant—tone.

‘It seems to me that Mr. Harding’s reappearing has turned your brain,’ said the mother, sharply, and referring to Blanche’s manner rather than her words.

To this Blanche made no answer. She felt that her lover’s reappearance really

had greatly elated her, had given her courage and energy, and a lightness and firmness of spirits such as she had not experienced for many a long day.

As she remained silent her mother made no further observation, and the subject was allowed to drop for the time, though in the morning Mrs. Vernon once more returned to the charge; but, finding Blanche unalterably firm, soon desisted, finishing by saying in a tone of vexation, 'Well, you must tell Mr. Grainger yourself, for I will not.'

'I shall have no fear of doing that,' Blanche answered; 'in the first place, I do not judge Mr. Grainger as you do; I would be sorry to think that he would wish to press for a continuance of the engagement under these changed circumstances.'

'You know what he told Mr. Harding?'

'Yes,' said Blanche, with a slight smile; 'but he might say things to Mr. Harding that he did not exactly mean.'

‘I think you will find that he meant what he said on this point.’

‘Well, in that case, as I observed last night, the nature of the situation would give me the courage to meet it.’

‘Well, well, take your own wilful way, then!’ exclaimed the mother, and giving her dress an angry rustle she swept out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

GRAINGER'S THREAT.

THOUGH she resented the idea of his any longer holding her to her engagement, Blanche, amid her own joy, experienced a feeling of compassion for Grainger. She knew that he loved her with all the strength of a peculiarly strong nature, and that he would be greatly disappointed by the turn things had taken. She could even conceive his being angry and unreasonable under the disappointment; but, at the same time, she fully believed in the opinion which she had expressed to the effect that he would not now deliberately insist upon their engagement being carried out. Not-

withstanding her confidence upon this point, however, she became very nervous and agitated, when presently she heard his ring at the door.

As he entered the room in which she was seated she glanced eagerly at his face, and saw that it was unusually pale and wore an ominously resolute expression. She had expected that on seeing her he would at once broach the subject, which, judging from her own feelings, she had taken it for granted would be uppermost in his mind—the subject, namely, of Harding's return. When, therefore, after bidding her good morning in his ordinary way, he began to discourse upon commonplace topics, as, though nothing had happened, she was quite taken aback, and, despite his studied efforts to force conversation and make it easy, she could only answer him confusedly and in monosyllables. When this had gone on for something like ten minutes Blanche began

to recover her self-possession, and she realised with a sense of dismay that he was, of set and determined purpose, acting upon the assumption that Harding's return was to make no difference between them. Her indignation at this gave her courage, as she had said to her mother it would; and, after letting things take their course for a few minutes longer, in the hope—which proved vain—that he would yet come to *the* subject, she started it herself.

At a moment when the conversation seemed in danger of coming to a standstill, he fell back upon that stock stop-gap of the weather, and after some more general remarks observed, 'I hope we shall have it fine to travel.'

Opening her eyes to their fullest extent, and turning them upon him with a look of questioning surprise, as if uncertain whether she had rightly comprehended his meaning, she quietly said, 'You seem to forgotten Mr. Harding's return.'

'I had not forgotten it,' he said, his face darkening as he spoke; 'but I thought you would scarcely care about its being referred to unnecessarily—it is an awkward thing, to say the least of it.'

'Yes; circumstances have made it so,' she said; 'and I am very sorry that so much of the embarrassment and unpleasantness arising out of it should fall upon you.'

'I daresay that he will think that most of it has fallen upon him; but so far as I am concerned I am desirous that there should be as little unpleasantness as possible for any one. I shall certainly not torment myself or annoy you by any foolish display of jealousy; and if Mr. Harding will be agreeable to our all meeting freely as friends, I am sure I will.'

He spoke with every appearance of gravity and earnestness; but she knew that he was wilfully misunderstanding her, and trying to overbear her in any attempt to recede from her engagement

with him, and speaking more coolly and firmly she said, 'I fear, Mr. Grainger, we are at cross purposes. Accident has interfered so strangely with our engagement, that I think it would be a pity to involve ourselves in any additional complications, through want of plain speaking. You speak as though you take it as understood that we are to be married notwithstanding the strange occurrence of last night; but my idea—and I believed and *hoped* that it would have been yours—is that we neither can or should be married.'

'We can be, and *I* don't see why we should not be. On the contrary, I think we ought to be, and I should still hope that we will be. You know, Blanche,' he went on in a tone of reasoning appeal, 'when Harding came so unexpectedly before I gave way at once, things had not gone so far then. But now it is different. We were on the very verge of marriage, and I had come to look upon my happiness as an

accomplished fact, I did think I could have done *anything* for you, but what you wish now is too hard, I can't *go* back ; don't you throw me over. Be just with me ; you promised to be my wife, but for a little accidental delay you would have been my wife before last night ; and if you had been, I am sure that the discovery that Harding was alive would not have made you a less true wife ; let the thoughts that would have weighed with you then plead for me now. Come, Blanche, say you will still be my wife ; you shall never regret it, I *will* make you happy.'

While speaking he had moved to her side, and as he concluded, he laid his hands on her shoulders, and looked beseechingly into her eyes, and his agitation evidently produced a similar feeling in her. The resentment that had been gathering in her mind was forgotten, and in a voice that trembled with emotion she answered,—

'O Mr. Grainger, don't urge me, pray ;

it cannot be. If it was only a sacrifice of my own inclinations, believe me I would make it—you deserve that I should. But whatever injury I may do you by asking you to release me from my engagement to you, I am certain that I would be doing you a greater wrong by going through with it. For your sake I will speak as perhaps in modesty I should not speak. I love Lionel Harding; love him as I feel I cannot love any other man, not even you who have been so good to me, who so richly deserve my love if I had any to give. I promised to be your wife, believing Lionel to be dead; but now that I know him to be living, I could not nor should not marry another,—we cannot control our thoughts. Be my friend still, but in mercy to us both don't ask me to be your wife.'

'And you would cast me aside for him?' he exclaimed, passionately, taking no heed of her concluding words. 'But

you shan't,' he went on, his face flushing heavily as he spoke. 'I'll make you draw the line at that, come what will as to the rest. If you won't marry me, I'll take care you don't marry him. *He* shall not have the laugh of me ; if I can't win you, I will make it a drawn game with him any way.'

'Don't be angry with me, Mr. Grainger,' she said in a tone that had more of sorrow than alarm in it ; 'you will regret having spoken such words when you are your better self again.'

'You are going the way to make me my worse self,' he answered sullenly, 'and you don't know what that is ; I tell you I've got a devil in me if I am crossed.'

'Oh, don't talk like that,—don't talk like that,' Blanche pleaded, laying her hand on his arm.

'Not talk !' he burst out, shaking off her light touch ; 'no, I suppose you would like me to put up with it all and not

speak, to be made a scoff and scorn to everybody, and above all to him, and be smoothed down by a few soft words, like some silly boy; but I won't—will you keep your promise and marry me?"

'I cannot, Mr. Grainger, it——'

'Will you? Will you?' he broke in.

'How can I, seeing ——'

'Tell me, will you? yes or no?' he again interrupted in a savage, overbearing tone.

'Then, no!' she said decisively, and for the first time there was a look of anger on her face.

'And so that is to be the end of my trying for you, is it?' he said, speaking with a cool malignity that was far more repulsive than his previous passion. 'This is to be my reward for putting your hopeful brother into a berth, and keeping you all going—I'm to be thrown off as soon, as I am not wanted. I must go to the wall when it pleases Mr. Harding to show up.'

'You are unjust, Mr. Grainger,' said Blanche, with a quivering lip, 'I am sorry to hear you speak in that way.'

'I expect you will be sorrier before I have done,' he answered with a savage sneer; 'I told you I had a devil in me, and I have; and you have roused it, and you shall feel its fangs. As you won't marry me, you must promise me that you will not marry him; if I can't have you, nobody else shall.'

'Oh, really, Mr. Grainger, this passes all reasonable limits,' she said; 'our conversation must end here.'

'No, it mustn't,' he said, with a mocking laugh, 'the point of it has to come yet. I told you just now that if you wouldn't marry me, you shouldn't marry him; I told him the same thing the first time I met him, and again last night. I've sworn it to myself, and as it happens I can make it good, and I will. I daresay it is unjust, and ungenerous, and dog-in-the-mangerish,

and all that sort of thing, but I don't care ; he shall not have the laugh of me if I can help it by *any* means. You had better promise me that you won't marry him ; you will have to do so, and you had better not drive me to extremes. This is no bragging talk just to frighten you ; I *can* force you to do as I want, but by a means that I do not even want to name, unless you compel me. After all, I don't want to torture you, or make myself look mean unnecessarily, but I will make certain that he doesn't triumph over me—Will you pledge me your word not to marry him ?

‘Most certainly not, sir,’ she replied, with indignant emphasis ; ‘but I repeat that this interview, and not only that, but all further intercourse between us, must end here ; and I can only regret for sake of the past, and of the obligations we have been under to you, that you should have shown yourself to be—what you are.’

‘Do you mean to marry him?’ he asked in a tone of sullen defiance.

‘There is no gentleman on the premises, and so I suppose I must submit to you continuing to inflict yourself upon me in this manner,’ she said, with a contemptuous curl of the lip.

‘Do you mean to marry him?’ he repeated doggedly.

‘I do!’ she answered sharply; ‘and now I shall listen to nothing further from you.’

‘Yes, you will, though,’ he said savagely, ‘you’ll listen to this—If you marry Harding, you’ll hang your brother!’

She staggered back, as though she had received a blow, and, staring at him wildly, gasped out, ‘Hang my brother! What do you mean?’

‘Just what I say. I know where your brother is; I have been in communication with him ever since he has been away, have supplied him with money, and been the chief means of screening him and keeping

him out of the clutches of the law, and all for your sake. I could enable the authorities to arrest him at any moment, and if you marry this fellow, I will as sure as I stand here.'

'You would never be so cowardly and cruel,' she said, speaking in a low, trembling tone, and with a scared look upon her face.

'I would do it, anyway,' he said, with dogged determination. 'The serpent that has stung me shan't wear my crown if I can help it, and if I can't help it in any other way I will in that. They say those laugh who win, but where no one wins, no one can laugh. I don't see why I should continue to have all sorts of consideration for a lot of people who have none whatever for me.'

'Believe me, Mr. Grainger, I considered you as well as myself in wishing to break off our engagement,' said Blanche, in a deprecatory tone.

‘Oh, I dare say,’ he sneered. ‘If I would have been put off with a lot of soft talk from you, and a “Ah, well, after all, I am sorry for the poor devil,” from him, it would have been all very well; but when I wanted consideration in deed, you would have thrown me off—if you could. My man Barber talks about my self-will being a thorn in the flesh to me; but others shall find it so as well if they won’t give way to it.’

‘Where is poor Sidney?’ she asked.

‘It doesn’t suit me to tell that,’ he said, ‘but don’t think that I can’t. You know his handwriting; look at these; you can see by the postmarks they have been received quite recently.’

As he spoke he drew some envelopes from his pocket and showed them to her, and she saw that the addresses on them were indeed in her brother’s handwriting. The sight seemed to affect her strongly, and suddenly covering her face with her

hands, she sobbed out, 'O my poor brother! my poor brother!'

One effect of this emotion was to cause an instant change in Grainger's manner. He had gone close to her to show her the envelopes, and now laying one hand lightly on her head, he said in a half-apologetical, half-pleading voice: 'There! there! Blanche! I think I must be half mad at your rejecting me; let us forget and forgive all that has been said now; only keep your promise to me; marry me, and you will see that all will yet be well.'

'Oh, no, no! I couldn't do that! Any thing but that,' she exclaimed.

Though the aversion in her tone was unconscious, it was unmistakable, and he knew, too, the meaning of her involuntarily shrinking away from under his touch. In a moment his savage mood returned, and, if possible, with increased vehemence.

'Very well, then, that settles it,' he said, hoarsely; 'but, by G—d, I'll stick as hard

to my text as you do to yours. If you marry Harding, your brother will swing. It lies with you to say the word ; do you engage not to marry him ?

‘ I will speak to him,’ she said.

‘ That won’t do ; you must decide not to marry him. Do you promise ?’

She paused for a moment, and then, looking up proudly, answered, ‘ Yes ; I know Lionel wouldn’t wish me to injure my brother on his account.’

‘ I would rather it hadn’t come to this,’ he said, in a tone of sullen apology ; ‘ but whatever you may think, Harding had pretty much the same feelings towards me that I had to him, and I was determined that he shouldn’t find my loss his gain, and you drove me to extremities before you would give in.’

She turned her face from him without answering, and then with a muttered good morning he left her.

How unhappy he had made Blanche

may be easily imagined ; but it is questionable whether on his departure he was not the more miserable of the two. The devil within him, which had enabled him to gain the triumph he had resolved to gain against his rival, had also rended himself. He felt both the loss of Blanche and the manner of it very keenly. For the first time in his life he experienced the bitterness of feeling degraded in his own estimation. He knew that she, too, would now regard him as mean and hateful ; and, after his fashion, he had loved her very dearly.

Though in her irritation Mrs. Vernon had said to her daughter that she must herself tell Grainger of his final rejection, she had fully expected to have been summoned to take part in the interview. She knew how desperately in earnest Grainger was in his desire to secure Blanche ; she understood his strength and tenacity of purpose, and she hoped that though she had failed he would succeed in over-per-

suading Blanche ; especially with a little moral aid from her, if, or rather *when*, she was appealed to. She was therefore annoyed as well as surprised when she heard him leaving the house, and saw, by the glimpse of his face which she caught from the window of her room, that he was leaving it in anger. After waiting for some minutes, and, finding that her daughter did not come, she went to her. Blanche was still strongly agitated ; but, disregarding this, or perhaps in her impatience not noticing it, her mother saluted her with a half-sneering, half-questioning, ‘ Well ? ’

Blanche looked up, but it was some little time before she could command herself sufficiently to speak. When she did recover her voice she burst out indignantly, ‘ He is a bad man ! A mean, cruel, cowardly, wicked man ! ’

‘ Heroics again,’ said the mother, shrugging her shoulders. ‘ In sober language,— what dreadful wickedness has he been

guilty of? Resenting being used as a plaything, I suppose?’

‘He has been guilty of this dastardly and wicked thing!’ retorted Blanche; and, her indignation giving her eloquence, she poured out the story of what had passed—of his threats, and the sacrificial promise he had forced her to make. ‘I am happy, at least, in escaping him,’ she concluded. ‘I tried to reason myself into loving him, but there was a something in my heart that made me shrink from him the first moment that I saw he wanted to be more than a friend; and my instinct was truer than my reason.’

Mrs. Vernon had gone very white as she listened, and her manner was painfully anxious, and her voice scarcely above a whisper as she asked, ‘But do you think it can be true, Blanche? Do you think he does know the whereabouts of our unhappy boy, or has he been in correspondence with him since that—that dreadful business?’

'If I had seen the slightest ground for doubting it I would not have made the promise,' answered Blanche, sadly.

'And do you believe he would carry out his threat?'

'I believe him to be capable of that, or worse, if anything can be worse.'

'Well, after what you have told me, Blanche,' said the mother, 'I am bound to admit that I, too, think there is very little he would stand at; but that very belief inclines me to doubt whether he has really the power he boasts of. If he had, why did he not—being so strongly desirous of an union with you, and so unscrupulous—use it to enforce the marriage with himself?'

'Because he knew exactly how far he could go,' said Blanche, proudly, and her eyes flashing as she spoke. 'After he had uttered his threat, I would not have married him even to have saved my brother's life. I would lay down my life to preserve

his,—*I am* going to lay down my happiness for his sake ; but the other thing would have been too horrible.'

She paused for a moment, shuddering, and then, with a vehemence that was slightly hysterical, she resumed, 'I cannot express the loathing, and fear, and shrinking antipathy towards him that this interview has wrought in me. I must speak strongly ; to have married him, feeling as I feel now, would have been to have consigned myself to a very hell upon earth. Sidney would not wish it ; one who would accept life at such a sacrifice would be unworthy to live. There is no saying how bad such a wretch as this Grainger could be, when there is revenge in his heart ; and I speak as I am speaking now to justify myself in refusing—as I would refuse at all hazards—if finding how far his threat has coerced me, he should later attempt to force me into a marriage with him ; not that I think it likely that he will do so. For my

brother's sake I tried my best to be humble and polite, but I felt that my horror showed itself in my face. He saw it, and, as I said just now, knew from it how far he might go, and he went to the utmost length.'

'I knew he would be likely to be brusque under rejection,' said Mrs. Vernon, 'but I had no idea that he could be so cruel to you; believe me, Blanche, when I urged you to marry him, I did believe he loved you devotedly.'

'Perhaps he did according to his wicked nature,' answered Blanche, with a touch of bitter irony; 'but, as you see, the tender mercies of the wicked are indeed cruel. He didn't wish to torture me,' he said; 'he was only determined that as he had the power to prevent a rival from triumphing over him, he would use it. It was at him that he struck, not at me, as if he did not know full well that the blow fell on me, that I was resigning happiness in

giving up Lionel, and finding a new unhappiness in the knowledge that my brother's life was at his mercy.'

As he concluded, there was an abrupt change in her manner, her voice died away in a half-choked sob, the expression of her face softened, and two great glittering tears gathered in her eyes. Her mother instantly noted the change, and, going up to her, and taking her hands, said soothingly, 'You have, indeed, cause to be unhappy, Blanche; greater, far greater cause than even I have, though this last news about our unfortunate boy makes me feel utterly miserable.'

Blanche made no answer, being, perhaps, afraid to trust her voice, and after a brief pause, her mother, speaking in a pleading tone, said, 'You will keep your promise, Blanche, for poor Sid's sake?'

'I will,' she murmured, 'fully and faithfully, and I can only hope that my doing so may protect and save Sid.'

'You will not allow Mr. Harding to over-persuade you?' went on the mother, in the same pleading tone.

'He will not attempt to do so; *he* would not bring sorrow upon me,' answered Blanche, and again for the moment her tone and look were proud.

Feeling herself how painful the interview was, Mrs. Vernon said no more; and presently Blanche crept away to her own room, and remained there alone with her grief, until Harding's arrival in the evening.

After what Grainger had said on the previous night he was prepared to find her in some trouble of mind, but, nevertheless, he was greatly shocked when, on her coming to him in the sitting-room into which he had been shown, he saw the expression of misery and anguish on her face. Impulsively he stepped up to her, and, taking her in his arms, murmured in a voice trembling from emotion, 'My poor

Blanche! I can see how the cowardly villain has been making you suffer; but keep a good heart, darling; we shall weather the storm yet, at least I hope so. But what is it? He spoke last night of having some hold upon you, by which he could bend you to his will—what did he mean?

‘O Lionel, you do love me! I know you do,’ she sobbed, letting her head fall upon his breast.

‘Heaven knows I do, Blanche!’ he exclaimed earnestly.

‘I know it,—I know it, Lionel,’ she said, without raising her head, ‘and I am so sorry, but—’

‘Sorry that I love you!’ he exclaimed, taking his arms from about her, and stepping back a pace.

‘No, no, not for that,’ she stammered; ‘I’m glad of that; it will be my comfort in the time to come; it is for you I am sorry. We—we must part, Lionel!’

'Part !' he echoed in amazement.

'Yes, Lionel,' she said, with a sorrowful shake of the head.

Suddenly stepping forward again, and tightly grasping her hand, while the hot blood rushed to his own face, he sternly exclaimed, 'You do not mean to say you are going to marry that fellow ?'

'No, not that,' she said, with a shudder ; 'but—but neither can I marry you, Lionel.'

He would have started back, but, clinging to his hand, she went on,—

'Don't be impatient with me, Lionel ; I am sure you will pity me, not be angry with me, when you hear the reason.'

'Forgive me,' he said, his manner softening again ; 'what you say makes me forget myself, but what is the reason—what is this Grainger's power over you, for I suppose that is what it comes to ?'

She was about to tell him, when she remembered that in the excitement of their

meeting, on the night before, she had forgotten to say anything of her brother. This confused her, and she stammered out, 'I ought to have told you—perhaps you—have you heard anything about Sidney?'

'Yes; I have heard of the misfortune that has befallen him. I say misfortune, for I cannot bring myself to believe that he is guilty of what is laid to his charge. Such a crime would be altogether foreign to his nature; and, besides, I know from himself that he loved the girl.'

'It was foreign to his nature, Lionel; I know he could not have plotted it; it was done in a moment of madness, and that is why I would screen him.'

'Do you believe he did it, then?' he asked.

'I scarcely know,' she answered; 'sometimes I think it must be some terrible mistake; but whatever we, his friends, may think, so many circumstances point to him as guilty, that others cannot but believe

him so. If he were taken, he would—would—O Lionel, I cannot speak the word ; it is a thing too dreadful even to think of. And it is to avert that—that thing, we must part. This Grainger has, by some means, found out my brother's hiding-place ; has been in correspondence with him ; and he vows that he will give him up to justice if I marry you.'

The angry oath that rose to his lips was only half swallowed down, and there was no mistaking the meaning of the fierce light that shot into his eyes : and tightening her hold upon his hand as he would again have withdrawn it, laying her other hand on his arm, and looking beseechingly into his face, Blanche exclaimed, 'Oh, pray, Lionel, don't give way to passion ; you must not see him ; any expression of contempt from you would drive him to do his worst.'

'The dastardly hound !' ground out Harding between his teeth. 'I mustn't see him, if I am to do nothing more ; it is

a pity it should be thought a crime, for it would certainly be no sin to rid the world of such a monster as him. It is hard lines if our happiness is to be destroyed in this way by him.'

'But you do not think that, in the face of his threat, I could have acted otherwise than I did?' she questioned, regarding him with a look of loving anxiety.

'No, Blanche, I don't blame you,' he answered softly; 'believing what he said, you were bound to yield; but may not his threats have been all bombast—is it likely that Sidney would correspond with him, and never write to you or your mother?'

'He showed me the letters in my brother's handwriting,' she put in.

'There is such a thing as fabricated letters,' he said; but she not having the knowledge that made the suggestion significant to his mind, regarded the remark as a wild one; and saying, 'I am afraid there is no room for doubt in the matter,' pro-

ceeded to give him the details of the interview with Grainger, and of the events generally that had taken place during his absence.

The effect of what she had to tell was naturally to dispirit him ; and, as she concluded, he observed with a sigh, ' Ah, well, Blanche, it all shows how little we know what is really for our good. How fortunate I thought myself—how fortunate every one else thought me, in escaping the fate of my shipmates ; and yet, you see, it *would* have been better for both you and me, that I had sunk with them.'

' Oh, don't say that, Lionel !' she exclaimed, forcing a faint smile. ' You may still be happy ; you will meet some one who will be all to you that I would have been ; but you will have a kind thought for me sometimes, even then ; you won't quite forget your poor Blanche, eh, Lionel ?'

She looked up into his eyes with the tears starting to her own ; and, strongly

moved by the sight of her emotion, he clasped her to his breast, and passionately exclaimed, 'Forget you, Blanche! Never! It is kind of you to talk in that way; but you know, Blanche, I could never be happy with another. But after all, dear, we must not despair; we are both young enough to wait; and this scoundrel may die; or a thousand things happen to free us.'

'I could be happy in that hope,' she said; and from this point their conversation was in a somewhat cheerfuller strain. In the course of it, Blanche was again congratulating herself on having, at any rate, escaped the crowning evil of a marriage with Grainger; and, after observing that she owed the escape to a rather curious circumstance, that had caused her, without exactly knowing why, to delay over the final preparations for the marriage; she gave him an account of her meeting with Jim Harrison at the Oringford Railway station.

Harrison had told him of it, but he let her finish her story ; and then, with a slight smile, he said, ' Well, Blanche, I think both you and I may say of him as Tennyson says of a departing year,—

" Though his foes speak ill of him, he's been a friend to me."

A promise prevents me from going into particulars, but——' He was interrupted by a knock at the door of the room, and on Blanche calling ' Come in,' Polly Mansell entered, and, in a tone and manner indicative of the utmost surprise, burst out, ' What do you think, miss ! If here isn't that wild Jim Harrison, Burn-my-heart-out, as they call him, you know—him that tried to throw Mr. Grahame down the shaft. He says that he wants to speak to Mr. Harding, and that he is sure Mr. Harding will see him ; and he won't go away unless I let Mr. Harding know that he is here ; so what could I do ?'

' Speak of—you know the rest, Blanche,' said Harding, in an undertone ; ' I was going

to tell you that I had met him before. I know that he has a strangely minute acquaintance with Grainger's movements; it is just possible that he may be able to tell us whether or not the fellow really does know where your brother is—should I go out with him or see him here?’

‘See him here,’ answered Blanche, whose curiosity was evidently aroused; ‘Show him in, Polly.’

CHAPTER IV.

HOIST WITH HIS OWN PETARD.

HARRISON entered the apartment with a triumphant smile upon his face, and having nodded to Harding, turned to Blanche, and greeted her with a 'Good evening, Miss.'

'Good evening,' she returned.

'You see,' he said, 'there was some meaning in what I told you at the station that morning. If you hadn't put off Grain-ger a little, the finding out that your sweetheart here *wasn't* dead wouldn't have been much use to you.'

'It is not much use as it is,' said Harding, bitterly; 'in fact, as things stand, it is rather worse than useless.'

'How is that?' asked Harrison.

'Well, I will tell you,' answered Harding; 'for, I believe, if there is anybody *can* help us, it is you. To put it in as few words as possible, Grainger says that he knows where to put his hand upon Miss Vernon's brother, and he swears that if she marries me, he will cause him to be arrested.'

'He has tried that screw, then, has he?' exclaimed Harrison; 'by the Lord, he is a villain! I thought he would, and yet I could hardly bring myself to believe that any one could be *quite* so bad.'

'Do you think he does know where Sidney is?'

'I know he does.'

'It appears most strange to me,' said Harding; 'that he should write to this fellow and not to his mother or sister.'

'Just take a look through these, and you'll find it isn't quite so strange as it seems.'

As he spoke he took a number of letters from his pocket, and handed them to Harding, adding, 'They're arranged in rotation : take that one first.'

They were from Grainger to Sidney Vernon, and from a hasty perusal of the one particularly indicated, Harding gathered that Vernon had been led to believe that a first letter written by him to his mother indignantly denying all knowledge of the murder, and speaking of returning to face inquiry, had been received by her, and answered at her request by Grainger in a letter in which, while expressing a hope that he *was* innocent, she desired him not to attempt to return until there should be a chance of *legally proving* his innocence,—a consummation towards which Blanche and she and Mr. Grainger would work their hardest ; and to conduct any further correspondence through Mr. Grainger, lest letters addressed to her might enable the police to get upon his track. The other

letters were also answers to letters written by Sidney, and were all written as though Grainger had merely been a vehicle of communication for the mother and sister.

When he had made out this much, he explained it to Blanche, who had been anxiously looking on.

She glanced at one or two of the letters, and then observed, 'I suppose there is no doubt about them being Mr. Grainger's?'

'Not a bit, Miss.'

'But how have you come by them?'

'You shall know all in good time, Miss ; but you may make yourself satisfied of this, Grainger shan't hinder you from marrying whom, and when you like, and he shan't hurt your brother. I told you at the station I would do you a good turn, and I will. I would do it independent of it serving my own purpose to do so, but you must let me work in my own way. It is a whim I know, but I look upon myself as playing a game with Grainger, and I want to play it

as I think scientifically—do you know what the stake is, Miss?’

‘No,’ she said, faintly, and shrinking back, for he had become strangely excited.

‘Then I’ll tell you,’ he exclaimed, vehemently; ‘his life, Miss,—his life, and I mean to have it.’

‘You surely do not still—you would not——’ she stammered, a look of alarm overspreading her face.

‘No, I wouldn’t murder him; I don’t want to lay a hand upon him,’ he said, with a savage irony. ‘When I said he had murdered my wife people said, No, no, Jim, that’s putting it too strongly. And, of course, he didn’t with his own hands, he only set the machinery in motion that he knew would cause her death, that was all, and that’s the kind of game I’m playing against him; I’ll make the powder and load the gun, but I won’t pull the trigger.’

‘I could not consent to be served by——’

‘By anything wrong! Of course not,

Miss, but there is nothing wrong in what I am driving at. It's all right and above-board, in fact,' he concluded with a discordant laugh, 'I may say very much above-board.'

'In short, you advise us to defy him?' said Harding.

'Yes, you may safely snap your fingers at him; he is as good as muzzled while I am to the fore.'

'Well, I have every reason to depend upon your word,' said Harding, in a slightly apologetical tone, 'but any error of judgment as to the strength of the check upon him, on which you are relying, would be very serious, this young lady's happiness and her brother's life are involved in the matter, would you mind telling——'

'That's what I've come for,' interrupted Harrison; 'you shall judge for yourselves; but, first, are you good for five hundred pounds? Not for myself,' he added, hastily,

as he noticed a slight cloud gathering upon Harding's face, 'but for one who has helped me—and through me you—in these affairs in such a way as makes it wise for him to clear out of the country.'

'I'm quite good for the amount,' said Harding.

'And you will pay it if I convince you that you and the young lady here may marry whenever you like so far as any hindrance from Grainger is concerned?'

'Yes.'

'That's all right then, I'll tell you the whole business from beginning to end; but it's rather too long a story to be given twice over; and so if Mrs. Vernon is about, and isn't afraid of venturing into the same room with me, she had better come and hear it now.'

Blanche went for her mother, and having acquainted her with what had taken place up to that point, brought her into the room, whereupon Harrison proceeded to

enter upon his explanations which greatly astonished the Vernons, though Harding, having already some idea of their nature, was less surprised.

When Harrison had got up to the point of his escaping from the Black Country, after the adventure at Gordon's Shaft, he paused, and Harding observed, 'Oh, I think I see your idea. You would use the threat of exposing him in reference to obtaining the stoppage of letters, and getting this Reeves to forge the one in Miss Vernon's name, as a counter one against his of giving up Sidney Vernon, but that, I fear, would not be strong enough to check him. Reeves couldn't say anything without criminalizing himself, and if you alone brought the charge Grainger would say it was false and brought out of revenge.'

'Yes, he'd say that fast enough, that's a favourite line with him; but that is neither here nor there now—you *don't* see my idea.'

‘How *do* you hope to thwart him then?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ he exclaimed, excitedly, rising from the seat into which he had thrown himself, ‘*by a rope round his neck!*’

The others were silent from amazement, and with increasing excitement he went on, ‘That’s how, I’ll thwart him with a rope,—the *hangman’s rope* about his neck.’

‘For heaven’s sake speak out, man, what do you mean?’ exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, advancing and clutching his arm.

‘Mean!’ he shouted, his face distorted with passion, ‘I mean what I can see you have half jumped to, Misses—that your son is innocent; *that it was Gaffer Grainger that murdered the girl.*’

‘Are you sure of this?’ she asked, tightening her grasp, and swaying unsteadily upon her feet.

‘As sure as that I am speaking to you; *I saw him do it.*’

‘And you let my poor boy——’ she

was beginning, when Harrison interrupted her : 'I was sorry for your son, Misses, and for you and the young lady here, too. If he had been taken I would have spoken out at all risks, though my doing so would most likely not have done him any good, and would have spoilt my plans. You don't know the devil I had to fight with. My bare word wouldn't have gone for anything against him, and so I didn't want to speak till I could prove the truth of what I said, independent of my word, and I can prove it now, prove it enough even for the law ; your son shall stand clear in the eyes of all.'

At this moment Mrs. Vernon was no longer the woman of the world. The feelings of the mother rose all supreme, and releasing her hold of Harrison's arm she sank on her knees to the ground, and sobbed out, 'Thank Heaven ! my poor boy ! my poor Sidney !'

Blanche was scarcely less affected, and

even Harding was so far overcome that it was some little time before he could speak. At length he asked, 'How did it all fall out?'

'In this way,' answered Harrison; and as he began to speak the mother and daughter, mastering their emotion, came closer to him to listen: 'when I went back in consequence of receiving the letter from Reeves, I got into the Hopewell neighbourhood while it was daylight; and as it wouldn't have been safe for me to have let myself be seen, I hid myself among the timber of a wood-wharf on the canal bank. I should have told you it was on the day of the murder, and just between dusk and dark I saw young Vernon and Miss Wilkinson come on to the towing-path together. They were too far off for me to hear what they said, but I could make out that they were quarrelling, and in a few minutes they separated, he going back by the iron bridge, and she coming

on towards the wood-wharf; and just as she got opposite to where I was lying who should meet her but Grainger, whom I hadn't seen coming in the contrary direction. He seemed surprised to see her, and asked her what she might be doing there.

“I've been meeting young Vernon,” she answered him, sneering, “he wanted to know decidedly whether or not I would have him; and as he has always been kind and gentlemanly to me, I thought it was a shame to act any longer by him as I have been doing, so I told him decidedly that I would not; and when he asked me why, I told him as plainly as I could bring myself to speak of such a thing, that I was in a condition that made it folly or something worse for me to think of any but one man.”

‘This put him in a passion, and he was beginning, “Did you?——” when she coolly cut him short with—“No, I didn't name you—didn't hint at any name, but

of course he may guess who the one man is."

'*I could have guessed easily enough,*' Harrison continued; 'but there was no need for guessing, for as they went on talking, it came out that Grainger was the man. He had got her to go away with him on the promise of marrying her privately; and, having got her into a false position, took advantage of her. He had, however, kept on saying that he *would* marry her, and she hadn't lost all hope of his doing so in time to save her from the last shame, until the word came of the supposed death of Mr. Harding here. Then he had turned round upon her; told her that he meant to have Miss Vernon, now that there was a chance; and offered her a lot of money if she would go away, or marry Vernon, or any of the other young fellows that were after her. She had been dreadfully indignant at this; but up to that time I don't think she had

answered him. But in his then saying
"But that she was a fool for not taking
his offer as in the money she shook her
head at him and with her eyes flashing
she answered him —

"And you are a rogue—a mean, un-
lucky rogue and a foolish rogue that,
for all your money and for all that I once
thought of you, I wouldn't wish to marry
you only for the sake in which I am in.
As it is however, I do want you to marry
me. I have the best right to you. And
if you don't marry me, I'll take care you
don't marry Miss Vernon. I'll expose you
to her."

"That was easier said than done," he
told her. And she answered, "But I'll bring
the people from Llandudno to prove what
I say."

"Oh, you forget," he said, jeering, "that
we were Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong there;
and that, while that couple were spending
it pleased them to call their honey-

moon at that Welsh watering-place, Miss Wilkinson was on a visit to some friends in London, and Mr. Grainger abroad on business. I would deny all knowledge of Mr. Armstrong ; and put it that your assertions were the jealous ravings of a foolishly ambitious girl, who had altogether misconstrued the meaning of a little civility from one above her in station."

" " You are a cowardly, cold-blooded villain," she said ; and it was about as much as she could say, for this had worked her into such a passion that she could scarcely speak.

" " Well, if I am a villain," he answered, still jeering, " I'm a clever one—too clever for you."

" " Not so much so as you may think," she said. " Miss Vernon will believe what I say, without formal proof. She doesn't think enough of you to wilfully blind herself for your sake ; she would be only too glad of a fair reason for keeping you at a distance. And you know it."

Harrison paused for a moment, and looked as though he half expected some remark from the others, who had been listening with breathless interest ; but they were too deeply intent upon hearing what he had still to tell, to risk bringing about a digression by any questioning ; and, seeing that they remained silent, he resumed :—

‘Bad a lot as he is, I’ll be so far fair to him as to say that I don’t think that, up to that moment, any idea of violence had entered his mind. But her last taunt seemed to sting him, and rouse the devil in him ; and striding up to her, and driving her to the edge of the towing-path in doing so, he grasped her by the arm, and asked, “Do you mean to say that you will go prating to her ?”

“I mean to say,” she answered defiantly, “that though I shall have to expose myself in doing it, I will expose you to her, and to the world. I swear it, as I live !”

‘“Then you shan’t live to do it—go!” he said. And before she could scream, he flung her into the water.’

There was a shuddering start among his hearers ; and Blanche, with two great tears coursing down her cheeks, murmured,— ‘Poor girl!’ On Mrs. Vernon’s face, too, there was a look of sorrow ; but the expression on Harding’s countenance was one of passion ; and, in a grating undertone he growled out, ‘The cowardly brute!’

‘I hadn’t been looking for anything like that,’ Harrison went on, ‘and, in my surprise, I shouted out something, I don’t know now what, and sprang out from behind the timber. On hearing the noise he turned round in a fright, and we caught sight of each other through the bars of the iron gate of the wharf.’

He paused for a moment, and turning his eyes from one to another of his auditors, at length settled them upon Harding, as though he had decided in his own mind

that he was the most likely to sympathise with what he was now about to say. Addressing himself more pointedly to him, though the others still listened with unabated attention, and speaking in an altered tone, he resumed, 'My wife's father, sir, was a local preacher of the Primitive Methodists, or, as we used to call them in the Black Country, Ranters, and I always used to go to chapel with my wife the Sundays that he preached. Most people think they are rather stogy in their preaching, and perhaps some of them are, but he wasn't. It was being really carried away by his feelings that made him sometimes look and act the things he was saying. However, one evening he was speaking in his sermon of the death of Abel, and tried to picture how Cain must have felt and looked when the Lord asked, "Where is Abel? What hast thou done?" You could tell that for the moment he felt it all; you could see the look of startled

horror flash into the face already pale with fear, and a sort of half shudder went through the congregation. It was a striking thing at the time, but I had never thought of it from that evening till the moment that Grainger turned round on hearing my shout. Then it all rushed into my mind,—the look on his face was the look of Cain. What he had done was about as cruel a deed as there well could be, and yet I believe that any one but me would have pitied him on seeing that look; but I remembered my wife, and I was glad; I felt half revenged!

Again he paused for a space, and then, dropping the parenthetical sort of tone in which he had last spoken, continued,—‘He could easily have got away, and I think he wanted to do so, but he seemed as if he was rooted to the spot. I climbed the gate as quickly as I could; and I believe I was on the path within a couple of minutes of his throwing her in, but I could

see nothing of her, and I don't think she ever rose. I waited, in the hope that she would, till I knew that she must be dead, he standing by like a statue. At last I turned on him, and that roused him, for I fancy he thought I was going to try to throw him out, but I said, "You needn't be afraid of me laying hands on you now. There is no need. I'll only see that you swing for this; that will be a far better revenge than shoving you in here." While I was speaking he had got to be more himself, and he says,—

"Now look here, Harrison, I know how you feel towards me, and I don't expect anything from you from favour, or think that any amount of money would buy you off if you thought you fairly had me; but if you will listen, I'll show you that you haven't got me as securely as you think, and that it will be to your interest to compromise with me."

"I'm listening," I answered, for I was curious to hear what he would say, and

he went on, and what he did say came to this,—If I accused him he would utterly deny everything, and put it to magistrates, or anybody else, that the most probable way of accounting for the girl's death was that she had met me skulking about, and I, with a view to preventing her from informing the police, had thrown her into the water; and then, as an after-thought, to screen myself, and gratify my mad hatred against him, had conceived the idea of charging him with the murder. At the same time he acknowledged that it would be very awkward and unpleasant for him in many ways to be charged with the murder, and to avoid that, and, as some compensation to me for other things that had happened between us, he would give me either a lump sum, or a regular allowance sufficient to keep me comfortably if I would be silent, and go away. By this time I was a bit cooler, and I saw the force of what he said. It was known that I had sworn

revenge against him, and after the Gordon's Shaft business many people would believe that I was capable of lying or murdering, or anything, to get it. Beside, there was a warrant out for me, and, with his money and influence against me, I might be packed off into penal servitude before I could do anything; while, if I was free and had money, I might, by acting upon what I had heard, get evidence to support my word in accusing him. Of course, this all flashed through my mind in a moment, and having decided to fight him with his own weapons, I answered him,—

“ Well, look here, Gaffer Grainger,—if I could hang you, not all the money in England would keep me from doing it; but I know how little chance—circumstanced as I am—my oath would have against yours. As I can't do what I want I'll take what I can get, and leave you to your fate, believing that what you have done will be brought home to you in some way or other.

I'm not the man I was ; I feel miserable among strangers, that is why I have ventured back here now ; and if, in addition to making me an allowance, you will get me out of the trouble about the mistaken attack on Mr. Grahame, I'll say content."

"How can I get you out of it?" he asked.

"If you will undertake to come forward and ask that I may be discharged, and get The Parson to do the same," I answered, "I'll let myself be taken, and run my chance ; for I feel pretty sure that the magistrates will let me off if you two say you wish them to do so."

He agreed, and I was going away, when he stopped me, and said, "Whatever you may think I had not premeditated this ; I met her by the merest accident, and did this terrible thing, that I would give the world to have undone, in a moment of passion. You heard how she goaded me?"

'I saw his drift, and I answered, "No, I didn't; but all the same I don't believe that it was only the goading of a woman's tongue that made you do it."

"Of course you'll believe the worst," he said, but I could see that he felt relieved.

'We parted at that, and, as you know, he and The Parson did speak for me, and I got off; and then with money he supplied me with, I set to work to get evidence to hang him—and I have got it.'

He spoke the last words with a triumphant satisfaction, and stopped with an air that showed that he considered he had concluded his narrative; but after the others had made a few remarks among themselves upon the strangeness and sadness of the matter he had related, Harding, in a questioning tone, observed,—

'I suppose you went to Llandudno?'

Harrison seemed to reflect for a minute, and then replied, 'I suppose I may as

well give you all details, for I have something else to mention, and everything will have to be told in a day or two anyway. I did go to Llandudno taking a photograph of Grainger with me. I got the back numbers of the local paper, with the lists of visitors staying at the different lodgings, and after searching a while came upon Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong. I went to the house they had been at, and asked the landlady if she remembered having had a couple of that name.

“Yes, she did,” she said.

“Would she know the man again if she saw him?”

“Yes, she would.”

“Was his likeness among those?” I asked, pulling out his, with half-a-dozen others that I had purposely mixed it with.

“That was him,” she said, picking it out at the first glance.

“Would she know Mrs. Armstrong?”

“Yes, that she would,” and she waited

as if for me to produce a likeness of her too, but I told her that I had not got one.

“Then I have,” she said, “and I will show it to you ;” and bringing an album, she pointed it out, and I at once recognised Florence Wilkinson.

“There she is,” she said ; “she had some taken while she was here, and gave me this one. We used to sometimes have a chat together when he was out. She seemed very unhappy, and I only hope, poor thing ! she was his wife.”

‘I made no answer to this, and then the conversation, I suppose, reminding her of it, she said,—

‘Oh, she left a brooch, with a miniature in it when she went away ; I have taken care of it, and I shall be happy to return it to her, if you can put me in the way to do so surely.’

‘I didn’t want to enter into explanations then, and so merely said that I couldn’t, but I asked her to let me see the

brooch. She did, and the miniature was a portrait of Dick Wilkinson. I told her to take care of the brooch as it was likely to be of importance. My manner and what I said of course made her curious, and after a little humming and oh-ing she said, "Excuse me, but was this Mr. Armstrong quite correct?"

"How quite correct?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "you are inquiring about him in a strange way, and when he was here our Inspector of police was making inquiries about him on the quiet."

"On what ground?" I asked in surprise.

"That she didn't know," she said; "and it was only fair to tell me that the Inspector had afterwards told her that Armstrong was all right, that he wasn't the man they wanted."

"This interested me, and that very afternoon I managed to scrape acquaintance with the Police Inspector, and over a glass

of grog in the evening I observed, in a half-laughing way, "I hear you had your eye on a friend of mine when he was down here a little while back."

"Oh," he said, dryly, "who might that have been?"

"A Mr. Armstrong," I answered.

"Oh, yes," he said, smiling, and coming out of his shell again; "I made a mistake there, I was on the look out for a couple that had done an elopement; and as the Armstrongs rather answered the description, and on watching him I found that, though settled in lodgings, he had letters addressed to the post-office in the name of Grainger, I was beginning to make inquiries about him, when I got word that the right parties had been found."

"I was ready to dance with joy at finding how I was getting the net round Gaffer; but I suppose I managed to conceal my feelings pretty well, for the Inspector never took alarm again, and by degrees I

got out of him that two or three of his men as well as himself, and the post-office clerk, would know Grainger by sight, and that the letters that came were from a certain mining company.

‘I had noticed the address of the artist on the photograph of Florence Wilkinson that the landlady had shown me, and the next day I saw him, and found that both he and his wife could identify Grainger as being the same man with Armstrong. I got him to make me some copies of the photograph, and here is one of them.’ He took a *carte-de-visite* from his pocket as he spoke, and handed it to Blanche, who, after a moment’s glance at it, said softly, ‘Yes ; that is poor Florence.’

‘There is no mistake about that!’ exclaimed Harrison ; ‘and I can bring a score of witnesses to prove that she was at Llandudno with Grainger passing as his wife.’

‘The evidence you have spoken of

would be amply sufficient to satisfy any jury,' said Harding.

'I haven't mentioned all yet, though,' said Harrison. 'I got hold of a clerk of the mining firm that the Inspector had named, and through him found out that Grainger had instructed them to send him some papers, that in the ordinary way of business would have reached him through Barber, to the Post-office, Llandudno. They have got it in their address-book, while at the same time he had led his clerks in the Black Country, not even excepting Barber, to believe that he had gone abroad. And now comes the part that will have most interest for the ladies here. It took some time to get up this information and arrange it in my own mind; but at length I had got things all thought out, and was just thinking of taking action when one morning Reeves comes to me looking so gleeful that I couldn't help asking what was up.

“I’ve come in for a cheap slice of luck,” he answered.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The reward that is offered for the apprehension of the fellow that put out poor Flo Wilkinson’s light,” he answered. “I can put the man-catchers on to him; and, as he deserves what he’ll get, I will.”

‘Though I was very much surprised, I was still more anxious to get him to explain, and so I asked him how he came to find out where he was?

“Well, I don’t mind telling you!” he said, after a little hesitation. “Sorting the letters one evening, a while ago, I noticed one addressed to a Trooper Johnson, of a dragoon regiment. The handwriting struck me at the moment as being familiar, and that of some person who one would hardly think likely to have acquaintances among private soldiers. However, I was in a hurry at the time; the letter went away with the others, and after the vague,

passing thought to which the sight of it had given rise, I forgot all about it till last night, when there was a similar one among the letters. This revived my recollection, and out of mere idle curiosity I looked at it more closely, and then I remembered the writing:—it was Grainger's. This discovery altered my feelings in an instant; I was more than merely curious to know what he could be corresponding with a soldier about, and on opening the letter, lo and behold! I found that Trooper Johnson and Mr. Sidney Vernon were one and the same person."

'Do I understand you that my son is a soldier?' interrupted Mrs. Vernon.

'He is; he enlisted a day or two after he left home,' answered Harrison.

'A soldier!—a common soldier,' she exclaimed, as if scarcely able to credit that such a thing could be.

'Yes; and a smart one, too,' said Harrison, who appeared disposed to take a

humorous view of her evident mortification upon this point.

‘Have you seen him, then?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I had those letters from his own hand,’ he answered.

‘Where is he, then?’ she questioned, excitedly.

‘Well, his regiment is stationed in London; you will see him soon,’ he replied; ‘but you had better let me finish just now. I haven’t much more to say.’ Without pausing to give her a chance of speaking again he went on, ‘Knowing what I did, I could form a pretty correct idea of what Grainger would be at in corresponding with young Vernon; and without telling my real reasons I persuaded Reeves not to interfere in the matter, and promised him that he shouldn’t lose by it; and that is the chief reason why I want the five hundred pounds for him. After what he had told me I determined to see Vernon, and sound him before taking my decisive step.’

'You wanted to make assurance doubly sure?' said Harding, with a slight smile.

'I did,' answered Harrison, emphatically; 'and it is almost marvellous the way things fell out to enable me to do so. When I was in London looking after the clerk of the firm that had written to Grainger at Llandudno, I called upon the mate who had assisted me in the Gordon's Shaft business. Coming from Hopewell, he got talking about the murder of Florence Wilkinson. He took it for granted that it was Vernon who had done it, while, without giving any grounds for my belief, I said very plainly that I felt sure he had not done it. I had quite forgotten this conversation, when, on the morning before I was going to start to London to seek out Vernon, I received a letter from this mate telling me that he had accidentally fallen in with Dick Wilkinson.'

Of this letter, which the reader has already seen, and of the interview with

Wilkinson, which has also been recorded, he gave them an epitome, and then went on, 'A day or two later I went to the barracks and found Vernon. He was very much surprised to see me, and, indeed, at first rather alarmed; but I soon convinced him that I meant to serve, not to injure him. I told him there were some who didn't believe in his guilt, among them Dick Wilkinson and myself, and that we believed we were on the track of the right party. I asked him if he had kept any letters he had received since that time; he said he had, and I told him to take care of them, as however simple they might seem to him they might be of great consequence in helping to prove his innocence. Of course I could have acted there and then; but I wanted to first serve out Grainger over the return of Mr. Harding here; but he will tell you all about that. I give him full leave, and the little I haven't already told him he will be able to guess from

what I have said now about Reeves. To make an end of my own story, I felt sure Grainger would make use of the threat he did, and so having let him show himself to the worst in the matter, I made ready to settle with him. I saw both Wilkinson and your son again this morning, and brought them together. I told them all that I have told you now, and got the letters from your son ; and now, Misses, you shall see your boy. Wilkinson and he are waiting a little way off ; I'll bring them.'

CHAPTER V.

JIM HARRISON'S REVENGE.

WHILE Mrs. Vernon and Blanche were yet uttering their exclamations of pleased surprise, Harrison hurried from the house, and in about ten minutes returned bringing the two young men with him.

On the meeting between Sidney and his mother and sister there is no need to dwell. It was a trying meeting, but a joyous one. The women fell upon his neck and wept, but their tears were tears of happiness, while he felt it no blot on his manhood that the water gathered into his eyes, and that once or twice his voice was broken by a great sob.

Dick Wilkinson, too, was warmly and

feelingly received, while Polly Mansell, who, forgetful of conventionalities, had rushed into the room on witnessing his and 'Master Sidney's' arrival, regarded him with such a look of love, that, regardless as herself of formalities, he threw his arms round her neck and imprinted a hearty kiss upon her lips, whereupon Polly, blushing very red, ran out of the room.

When the others had grown sufficiently calm to do so, they proceeded to take counsel together as to how they should act in respect to the man whom they now regarded as the common enemy of them all, and they were not long in deciding that a warrant against him should be applied for on the following morning. They were still discussing the matter when Polly Mansell brought word that there was a gentleman at the door who wished to speak to Mr. Harding.

'Who is it?' Harding asked of Polly, when he was in the passage.

'I wasn't to give his name,' she answered.

'I must see for myself, then,' he said, walking on, and the next instant he was face to face with Lawrance Barber.

'Holloa !' he exclaimed, shaking hands with him, 'won't you come in ?'

'Not just now ; I want to have a few words with you alone.'

'All right ; wait till I put my hat on,' answered Harding, suiting the action to the word, and then they went out together.

'I suppose you are rather surprised to find me running down upon you in this way,' said Barber, opening the conversation.

'Yes, rather ; though I take it your coming is in some way connected with Grainger or his doings.'

'Yes, it was from him that I heard of your return, and very glad I was to hear of it for many reasons ; but he soon put a damper on my feelings in that respect, and that is why I am here now. The Vernons

have, I suppose, acquainted you with what passed between Grainger and Blanche ?'

'Yes, everything.'

'Then, I can come to the point at once. Understand me, in the first place, I have no sympathy with young Vernon over the murder of that poor girl. It was a dastardly act, even supposing—as I am perfectly willing to believe, was the case—he did it in a passion. I do not think I would attempt to interfere with any one who wished to give him up to justice upon principle ; but Grainger's motive in threatening to denounce him is so monstrous that there can be no sin in conniving at the screening of him, for the sake of those at whom it is sought to strike through him.

'But he——' Harding was beginning, when, seeming to change his mind, he checked himself, and in a different tone finished, 'However, go on ; I'll have my say when you have ended yours.'

'Well,' resumed Barber, 'when he told

me what he had threatened, even I could scarcely believe that he was serious, and I thought it very likely that you would not believe that he was, and act—and try to induce Miss Vernon to act—in defiance of him. But I find that for the time being at any rate he is in deadly devilish earnest, and I have looked you up to tell you that it is so, and advise you not to provoke him further in his present mood.'

'I know you mean kindly, Barber,' said Harding, heartily, when the other had spoken, 'and I thank you sincerely both for myself and Blanche. Neither of us doubted his intention to carry out his threat, if he was defied; and we were just trying to reconcile ourselves to submitting to the power that circumstances gave him over us, when we were most unexpectedly put in possession of the means to draw his sting—and more——'

'What do you mean?' asked Barber, in astonishment.

'This !' exclaimed Harding, no longer restraining his feelings ; and triumphantly and impetuously he repeated the substance of Jim Harrison's story.

Barber listened in the utmost surprise ; and when the other had concluded, emphatically exclaimed, 'Well, you do astonish me !'

'And we'll astonish him, and that most disagreeably,' said Harding. 'He has not shown, and would not have shown, any mercy, and he shall have none. Indeed, so far as that goes, neither I nor the Vernons could show him mercy, even if we were disposed to do so ; this Harrison means war to the knife, or, perhaps, I should say to the rope ; there will be a warrant out against Grainger to-morrow.'

'Of course I couldn't blame any of you for hunting him down,' said Barber.

'No, he can look for no pity from any of us ; but, however, his crimes in no way reflect upon you ; will you come into the house ?'

‘No, thank you,’ answered Barber; ‘I want to get back to town; some other time. Good night.’

When he had parted from Harding a look of perplexity came over his face. ‘Well,’ ran his thoughts, ‘this is a fix; how shall I act now? Harding has told me this in perfect good faith, taking it for granted that I would not warn the other; thinking, I suppose, that no one would wish to warn such a—as he thinks him—monster. On the other hand, I owe a great deal to Grainger; and bad as others may think him, I can understand his not having been altogether cold-blooded; love for Blanche, hatred for Harding, and his familiar devil of self-will, have urged him on until he has been mad; for though it was the madness of badness, he must have been virtually mad when he did these things.’

Up to this point he had been walking with the slow gait of one lost in thought, but suddenly he quickened his pace, and in a low,

decided tone, exclaimed, 'Hang it, it's for dear life; I won't see him trapped for want of a word of warning.'

He got to the Blackheath station just in time to catch a train to Charing Cross, and within an hour of his forming his resolve he was alone with Grainger in a private sitting-room of a West-end hotel.

Just before Barber came in Grainger was moodily pacing the apartment with a cigar in his mouth; and any one who had not been aware of the fact that he was the great Mr. Grainger, whose 'iron' will and nerve, 'immense vitality and indomitable energy,' were the constant themes of praise among his admirers, would have thought that he looked weary and careworn; and that his looks and tone were rather those of an unnerved, than an energetic man, when, on Barber's entrance he turned a startled glance upon him, and hurriedly exclaimed, 'Holloa, Barber, back again! What is it? Anything wrong?'

'I am afraid there is,' said Barber, seriously.

'What? where?' the other asked, in the same quick, nervous way.

'With you,' said Barber.

'With me!' he echoed, elevating his eyebrows; 'in what way?'

'Since I left you in the early part of the evening I have seen Harding,' answered Barber, with intentional significance, and fixing his eyes upon the countenance of the other as he spoke.

'Oh, you have, have you?' said Grainger, his tone instantly becoming savage; 'and I suppose he has been asking you to intercede for him, to put it to me, how mean, and dog-in-the-mangerish, and all the rest of it, I am to stand in his light, as I am doing.'

'If he had asked me to do that,' answered Barber, 'I would have told him it was no use. He spoke in a very different strain.'

'Oh, he took the high and mighty line, did he? He'll——'

'I'll tell you if you will listen,' interrupted Barber, and, consciously or unconsciously his manner grew stern: 'He has seen Jim Harrison.'

He paused for a moment to see whether this announcement would have any effect, and he saw that Grainger, despite a strong effort at self-control, started and coloured; and that the apparent indifference with which he uttered a questioning, 'Well?' was forced.

'Well,' said Barber, speaking slowly and distinctly, 'Jim Harrison has told him that it was *you*, not Sidney Vernon, who murdered the girl.'

Grainger turned deadly pale, and it was with a very small degree of success that he attempted to put a tone of unbounded surprise into his voice, as he exclaimed, 'Me! Why, the fellow must be mad!'

'If he is, there is method in his mad-

ness then,' said Barber. 'His story is, that he was lurking about in the wood-wharf, and saw the girl leave Vernon, and meet you; that he overheard what passed between you and her, and saw you throw her into the water; that he had then come out upon you, and feeling, on your saying that you would deny everything, that he would be weak without witnesses, he had misled you as to his having overheard what had passed, and then set about working up the clues that the conversation had pointed out.'

He went on to tell him at some length what evidence Harrison stated he had got, and concluded, 'There will be a warrant out against you in the morning; you know best whether you can safely allow it to be executed.'

'I can't, Barber!—I can't!' exclaimed Grainger, who up to this point had seemed to be thinking rather than listening. 'That devil, Burn-my-heart-out, has been too

many for me. I did do it, though I had no thought of such a thing until the moment, and *at* the moment scarcely knew what I was about. After Harding had gone away on his last voyage, and before the news of his supposed death came to hand, I, one night, proposed to the Vernon girl again, and she refused me, and flung her love for Harding in my teeth. Just after leaving her I met poor Flo; she could see that there was something wrong with me, and she was very tender and kind about me. I remembered then that she at any rate loved me, and I suppose I was in a sentimental mood, and—and the upshot was that I asked her to come away and marry me, privately. At the time I really meant it, and merely wished it to be private to avoid fuss and comment, and before we parted we agreed upon our arrangements.

In the meantime, however, I cooled, and wished myself out of the affair, but I didn't say so to her; I let things drift. When

we were fairly started on our journey, I told her a story about some formality having delayed the issuing of the license. She was compromised then, and, under a promise that I really would marry her, she consented to go on and pass as my wife. When she discovered the condition she was in, she was of course very urgent that I should fulfil my promise, and I believe I would ultimately have done so, but for the word coming out of the loss of "The Hybrid." That determined me to go in for Blanche Vernon again, and then Flo turned tiger upon me. On the evening when I met her on the bank of the canal, she threatened me with exposure, and taunted me with Blanche not caring for me ; and in a moment of mad passion I —— I —— '

His voice died away, and he covered his face with his hands. He sat thus for about a minute, and then, looking up, said sadly, 'It is a bad, bad business, Barber, a miserable ending to all that I have accomplished.'

'It is a bad job, and a cruel one,' said Barber; 'I will be plain with you: I owe something to myself as well as to you. If the penalty for what you have done was anything less than what it is, I would not have stood between you and it; but I do believe that so far as the actual death of the girl was concerned, you acted in blind passion, and after being in daily intercourse with you for years, I could not stand by and see you brought to a dog's death, when by speaking a word I could give you a chance of escape. Harding, I know, took confidence as understood between us, but fortunately he did not specifically pledge me to secrecy, and I have taken advantage of that quibble to warn you.'

'You are very good, Barber,' said Grainger, his voice trembling as he spoke. 'I won't forget you when this blows over, if it *does* blow over, for I feel a strange presentiment of evil. However, I dare say that is the nervousness arising out of what

you have told me ; but, in any case, I won't give way to such a feeling, and I must act at once. I know what Burn-my-heart-out is ; I'll be off this very night, I'll go ——'

'Don't tell me where you will go !' exclaimed Barber, checking him ; 'I want to be able to say that I don't know.'

'Very well,' said Grainger ; 'but if I find a safe means of communicating with you, will you see to some business matters for me ?'

'Yes, and now I'll leave you to take what steps you think fit. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye !' said Grainger, grasping the other's proffered hand with nervous energy, 'and thank you ; I feel what you have done for me.'

'I am heartily grieved, Grainger, that the occasion for such a service should have arisen,' said Barber ; 'you have made sad wreck of yourself. However, this is not the time to dwell upon that, you must be prompt if

you would save yourself from the consequences of your acts ; so, once more, good-bye, and may you live to be a better, a less self-willed man.'

'I hope I will ; I'm sorry for what I have done. Good-bye ;' and thus they parted.

'Who was the mysterious stranger, Lal, if it is a fair question ?' asked Sidney Vernon, when Harding returned to the house after his interview with Barber.

'Mr. Barber ; Grainger's Mr. Barber.'

'Indeed ! and what did he want ?—still if it is a fair question.'

'It need be no secret among present company,' answered Harding, proceeding to relate what had taken place.

'Why, you don't mean to say you have gone and told him everything,' exclaimed Jim Harrison, with a rather startling energy, when the other had finished.

'Oh, he won't repeat it to Grainger,'

said Harding ; 'he isn't so fond of him as people in general seem to suppose.'

'I know that,' answered Harrison, 'but still he might think enough of him to be willing to save his neck.'

'Perhaps I should not have spoken,' said Harding, 'in fact, on second thought, I wish I had not. Still I hardly think Barber would warn him, he would know that confidence was implied between us.'

'Well, it certainly would have been safer to have kept your own counsel,' said Harrison ; 'but it is done now and can't be helped, and after all I dare say it won't make much difference.'

But though he spoke in that way he seemed moody, and shortly afterwards took his leave.

He at once bent his steps towards the station, and as he went along, muttered, 'It's a good job he told me that he had told Barber. If he is warned he'll make a run for it at once ; but he can't get much

start of me, if any. He shan't escape the hangman if I can help it, or even if through Harding opening his mouth he does that, he shan't escape me ; I'll hunt him out, and hunt him down, go where he may.'

On reaching the station he found that he would have to wait some little time for a train to London, a circumstance that chafed him very much ; but even with this delay he was at Grainger's hotel an hour and a half after the time Barber had reached it. It was then just past midnight and the night porter was in charge. From him Harrison asked, 'Is Mr. Grainger in ?'

'Mr. Grainger,' said the porter, slowly, 'let me see, Mr. Grainger ; oh, I recollect now ! No, he has just gone, at least about a quarter of an hour ago.'

'He must have gone in a hurry then,' said Harrison, striving not to betray the excitement he felt.

'Yes, he seemed in a hurry,' said the porter, carelessly.

Harrison deliberated for a minute, and then speaking at a venture, asked, 'Do you know which station he went to?'

'No, I—oh, yes, I do, the Great Northern; I heard him tell the cabman.'

He had got the information he wanted, and with a brief 'Thank you' he hastened away, and, hailing the first hansom he met, started for the station in the hope of yet being able to intercept the flight of his enemy.

He sprang from the cab in hot haste at the station-gates, but found them closed.

'Has the train gone?' he asked of the policeman in charge of them.

'What train?' asked the officer.

'Has there more than one train left within the last quarter of an hour or so?' asked Harrison, in a somewhat dismayed tone, for the policeman's question suggested a new difficulty to his mind.

'Passenger trains, do you mean?'

‘Yes, yes, but not local ones ; trains to seaports or far-away country places.’

‘I guessed it was country trains you meant,’ said the policeman, with a good-humoured smile, for in his excitement Harrison spoke with a decided provincial accent, and the other regarded him as some benighted excursionist who was in a muddle concerning his return train — ‘I guessed that, but there hasn’t any country train gone out this two hours.’

‘There will be one about going, though ?’ said Harrison.

‘No, there won’t be one till six o’clock,’ said the policeman, shaking his head.

‘He has hoodwinked me after all,’ muttered Harrison, with a bitter oath, while a look of rage and disappointment swept across his face.

‘If you will tell me what it is you want,’ said the policeman, ‘I may be able to help you.’

‘I wanted to see a—a gentleman, wanted him very particularly, and when

I called at the hotel he was staying at, they told me he had gone off in a cab to the Great Northern Station a quarter of an hour before. I have come straight from there after him, and you see how it is.'

'Yes, I see, there has been some mistake,' said the officer, but the next moment he seemed to remember something, and just as Harrison was turning away, exclaimed, 'Hold hard a minute! Was he a well-to-do gentleman, one like that could pay for a special train if he wanted it?'

'Yes, yes,' answered Harrison, eagerly. 'Why?'

'Oh, well, perhaps they have told you right enough; there was a gentleman here just now wanting a "special" in a great hurry, and when he found he couldn't get one for a couple of hours he paid to have a carriage put on to a fast "goods" that was just ready to start for Hull.'

'That'll be him!' exclaimed Harrison, excitedly. 'Has the train gone?'

‘It should be, but putting the carriage on would delay them a bit. You might catch it yet if you look sharp,’ answered the policeman, and in a few hasty words he directed the other to the part of the station where the train would be if it had not gone.

Harrison hurried away, and in a very short time reached the platform to which he had been directed. It was a long one, and as he came upon one end of it he saw a goods train standing about the centre of it, and glancing forward made out that there was a passenger carriage next to the engine. He uttered a cry of exultation, but the sound both of that and of his footsteps as he rushed up to the carriage was drowned by the noise made by the engine in ‘blowing off.’ Without a moment’s hesitation he pulled the carriage door open, and Grainger, who was lying back in the opposite corner, startled by the action, looked up and met the eyes of the other glaring upon him with an expression of savage triumph.

‘You?’ he gasped out, shrinking back as far as he could.

‘Yes, me, Gaffer!’ he exclaimed; ‘you don’t shake me off, and you shan’t; I’ll stick to you till the end now, it won’t be long; and such an end, Gaffer—the rope! For all your cleverness you are a fool in some things. You might have known I had heard what passed between you and the girl; wasn’t I alone with you? I would have put *you* in the canal, not taken your money, only I felt sure I had you another way. But this is a better; out you come, you beast!’

He was standing on the step, and as he finished speaking he advanced his one foot inside the carriage, and seizing Grainger, attempted to pull him out. At the same instant there was a short, sharp whistle, and the train started. This, it flashed through Grainger’s mind, meant escape for him if he could but hold on for a moment or so; the other could not stick to him

beyond the end of the platform. The thought gave him a strength as great as that which hatred lent to the other. The first jerk had brought him to the doorway, but there he held fast, and a quick, fierce struggle commenced. But while he held his own for the moment, Grainger felt that he was decidedly the weaker of the two, and could not maintain such a contest for any length of time ; and it was therefore with a feeling of deadly horror that he found his foe still clinging to him when they had passed the platform. The passion aroused by the nature of the situation had blinded Jim Harrison to everything but the purpose of the instant. He had taken no note of their having cleared the platform, had no thought of the consequences that might ensue from their having done so, and, indeed, was probably scarcely conscious that the train was moving. Without knowing the cause, he suddenly felt the other's strength falter, saw his face go

deathly pale, and his lips quiver in an attempt to speak. These were the things *he* observed. Uttering an exclamation of satisfaction, he put all his strength into a final pull. It was met with even less resistance than he had expected, and, thrown off his balance, he went crashing down, dragging his enemy with him.

A wild, despairing shriek, rising above the clatter of the train, reached the ears of the driver, and almost at the same instant he felt his train jolt heavily. He knew that he had 'gone over some one,' and pulled up as rapidly as he could, and the guard and he going back with lanterns found two mangled bodies, the one still tightly clutching the other.

They had been drawn under the wheels head first, and their deaths must have been instantaneous. There were papers upon Grainger's body that established his identity, and early in the morning Barber, Harding, and the Vernons, knew that, with

all his imperfections on his head, he had passed to his last account.

The little that remains of our story can be told in a few words. Barber interceded for his master's memory. He spoke of the inordinate self-will that had been such a thorn in the flesh to him, that had warped his mind, and entered his soul and cankered it, and reasoned that what he had done had been in a greater measure attributable to that than to any deliberate villany or blood-thirstiness of disposition. He dwelt upon his better qualities, and the fact that he had really loved Miss Vernon, though in an evil fashion; and his pleading was successful in the end. It was agreed that no more should be said, either at the inquest or elsewhere, than was absolutely necessary to make Sidney Vernon's innocence of the murder apparent, and the arrangement was strictly adhered to.

Harding gave the five hundred pounds to Reeves, together with a very decided

intimation that it would be for his own as well as for his country's good that he should take himself abroad as speedily as convenient. He saw, too, that Harrison's body was taken back to Hopewell, and laid beside his wife's. But Grainger, who had neither kith nor kin, was buried in a metropolitan cemetery, Barber acting as chief mourner, and causing the grave to be marked by a simple stone, recording his name, and age, and the date of his death. An examination of his papers led to the discovery of a will. It had been made directly after the attack on The Parson, and had probably been prompted by that event. It left a legacy of ten thousand pounds to Mr. Grahame; twenty thousand, and the rich pit known as 'Grainger's Sinking,' to Barber; and the remainder of his fortune to Blanche Vernon. And Barber was appointed executor, with instructions to convert the property included in the last bequest into money. At first,

Blanche had scruples about taking it ; but ultimately she reconciled herself to doing so, by resolving that out of it she would pay her father's debts ; and so large had been his losses and defalcations, that when this had been done, what remained, though still a large sum, could scarcely be considered a fortune in itself. Blanche and Lionel were, of course, married ; as were also Dick Wilkinson and Polly Mansell ; and when Harding started business on his own account, Dick went into his service. What he had gone through had made him a steadier and better man ; and the same could be said of Sidney Vernon in a still greater degree.

Barber was now a rich man ; and he was disposed to enjoy his riches. To this end, he was desirous of setting up a more than bachelor establishment. Casting his eyes about for a wife to preside over and adorn it, they fell upon Mrs. Vernon, with whom, as executor of Grainger's will, and

Blanche's agent in the payment of her father's liabilities, he came a good deal in contact. As the lady was nothing loath to have a good establishment to preside over once more, and as Barber was a well-favoured, well-educated, gentlemanly fellow, she received his advances graciously ; and the result was that they were married some six months later than Blanche. The marriage turned out a very comfortable one, and Blanche's an extremely happy one.

When those whose happiness he had served in his own misguided pursuit of vengeance, met together in after times, they would often refer tenderly to the memory of " poor Burn-my-heart-out," and all—even Dick Wilkinson—came to speak forgivingly of Grainger, and to make generous allowance for the failing that had proved such a thorn to him in life.

THE END.

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